

THE CHALLENGE OF KEEPING SABBATH  
AS OBSERVED IN THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF ROME, PA

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BY  
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to show that Sabbath keeping is still desired by God and is best accomplished within a community rather than on one's own. American culture has made it increasingly difficult for people to choose one day of rest and worship, and the desire to exercise the discipline required to stand up against the culture has greatly diminished. This thesis includes Biblical study, theological understanding, a report on a small group undertaking the challenge of keeping Sabbath together, and a plan for further teaching for a specific congregation on the topic of Sabbath. The conclusion is that Sabbath keeping is a discipline that benefits from group support and has rich restorative benefits for the body, mind and soul for those who participate in it.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **TODAY'S REALITY: SABBATH KEEPING IS VANISHING**

#### **Introduction**

Imagine a motorist approaching an intersection. The light is yellow and there is just a moment to choose whether they are going to stop or go. That motorist knows that to stop would be the safe, law abiding, risk free thing to do but just as yellow turns to red, they gun the motor and shoot through the intersection. It is a risk. There could be a police officer watching for an opportunity to dispense a ticket, or an anxious motorist peeling out on the green light. But the car shoots through and once on the other side the driver relaxes their shoulders and grip, resumes a safe speed and congratulates them self on all that time saved that could have been spent sitting at that red light. Oddly enough arriving at their destination they find that the car, which was behind them at the intersection is pulling into the parking spot next to them before they get out of the car, and that motorist is forced to ask, "What was my hurry?"

It's a bit how Christians tend to approach the Sabbath. For our well-being and the well-being of others, God put a stoplight into our week's journey. As the weekend approaches we see it – the yellow light of Friday warning us that it's time to prepare to stop. A decision needs to be made. Will the warning be heeded or will the gas pedal be put to the floor as we race to get through another weekend by accomplishing as much as we can as fast as we can? The dangers of exhaustion, distraction, and the absence of time for God are real as we careen through the intersection of the weekend. Rushing through without a break for rest and worship does not really prepare us any better to enter the week ahead, but we convince ourselves that it does.

This thesis sets out to demonstrate that God established the Sabbath at the beginning of the world, has renewed it in Christ's redemption, and has always desired that all creation keep it, therefore today's followers of Christ are meant to be Sabbath

keepers. Keeping this redeemed creation mandate is not without its problems, the biggest of which is that practicing the Sabbath as mandated by Scripture has become a lost discipline in today's church and society, which has put us out of step with God's design. This research proposes that if Christians would commit themselves to the discipline of keeping the Sabbath holy, they would be realigned with God's design, and receive the blessing of living within God's rhythm of work and rest. This realignment would be recognized in a new sense of identity as God's people, a new balance by being restored to God's rhythm, and a new community and a new sense of community as those united under God's design.

### **The Problem and Its Setting**

The Sabbath, for some in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, has no meaning. For most Christians who recall their life over the past fifty years or so it is Sunday, the first day of the week,<sup>1</sup> the day set apart for worship and rest, and the day the stores used to be closed. For those of Jewish heritage it is the holy seventh day set forth in Mosaic Law that is to be separate from all others and used for rest, worship, and family. In Scripture it is the day God stopped making things and pulled back to observe and revel in all God had created. Changing times and circumstances have helped to confuse the definition of Sabbath, and in turn this has worked against Christians to know what exactly it means to keep Sabbath. This loss of definition and a culture that operates twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, has driven the North American church and society to a crisis of constant busyness.

There are many examples of the loss of God's rhythm. In Bradford County, Pennsylvania and particularly in the communities of Wyalusing and Rome, productivity is

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<sup>1</sup> The exception being those denominations, such as Seventh Day Adventists, who claim Saturday, the seventh day, as the Sabbath.

seen as key to being a good human being. Surrounded by big companies who employ people 24/7,<sup>2</sup> a mindset has worked its way first into those employees and then into the communities. It is a mindset that says, "We must keep going, we must be productive. We only stop when we must and then it is a time to plan out what we must do next." For many people currently in the work force there is no sense of work and rest, but only the perceived need to keep busy. God's rhythm of six workdays and one day for rest is blown off as a waste of time. This attitude impacts the whole community and those who would celebrate the rhythm by keeping Sabbath are made to feel guilty for stopping.

In one of these towns, there is a new Little League field. During the final year of the three-year process of constructing it, a call went out to folks in the community to meet there every Sunday morning to work on the field until it was done. Incidentally, a church member who saw no real need to connect with the church family on a Sunday morning sent out this call. There were not many who stood up and said, "I am in church with my family on Sunday morning and will not be joining you."

Another example is found in the arena of school athletics. The week after school is out for the summer, the high school begins Sunday afternoon "optional" practice for soccer and volleyball. It happens to be at the same time the local youth group meets. The kids are told they have a choice about going to practice but know that "optional" isn't really the truth and if they are not at practice regularly they will not play as much during the season. In speaking with coaches it is obvious that in their mind, daily practice must happen if they are to be a winning team. Surely the church will understand. With the 24/7 factories employing their parents and the coach driven to have the best team, students grow up thinking that going constantly and being hyper productive is what makes you right with the world.

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<sup>2</sup> The big companies in this area which employ around the clock are: Proctor and Gamble, DuPont, Sylvania, and Cargill.



But inside each of us there is a true yearning to be involved in a different sort of rhythm. This became more evident when an article titled “‘Secular Sabbath’ A time to Unwire, Unwind” was published.<sup>3</sup> There has been a new awareness among those permanently connected with the Internet that they need time off-line. From this acknowledgment there have been instituted programs such as “52 Nights Unplugged” and “No Laptop Sundays”. Atheists and un-churched folk are practicing these “Sabbaths” not because they acknowledge that they are seeking God but because they are responding to the God-given rhythm that God created every human to respond to. There is a real need for today’s society to respond to God’s time, but being in too much of a hurry and wanting a quick fix, the slowing down of productivity is avoided at all costs.

The problem with keeping Sabbath is more complex than setting a day apart. The people of God have forgotten who they are and Whose they are. Intended for God but persuaded by lesser voices, humanity has come to believe that we are intended for our own pleasure. This puts us in a position to push away from God rather than draw near to God. Many people have come to believe that they can live without God or at least just deal with God as they feel comfortable. The truth is that God loves and wants a relationship with the people created in God’s image. God has made this clear in creation and in the sending of God’s Son Jesus Christ and sustains the notion through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Through general revelation God has set everything up so that humanity cannot miss God, yet we do. Why is that? When God is so obvious, why is God so easy to ignore? Is it because “we all like sheep have gone

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<sup>3</sup> Hillary Rhodes, “‘Secular Sabbath’ - Spending a Day in the Unvirtual World,” (*Northwest Arkansas*) *The Morning News*, 16 March, 2008, 10E (see copy in appendix).

astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (Is 53:6a, NIV<sup>4</sup>)? As leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century church, where might we begin to draw our congregations and communities back to the reality that God matters? Where might there be an opportunity to make a change; take a stand, as the people who are seeking God, to encourage and invite people to come to God? There is a wealth of spiritual disciplines that might be of aid on this course but the one of interest here is that of restoring the practice of Sabbath keeping.

### **In the Beginning**

In the beginning God created the world, and everything in it, with desire and intention. God was deliberate about everything God made and how God made it. Upon observing all that God had made, Scripture says, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good" (Gen 1:31). But then sin entered the scene, and it *deformed* all that God created. Millard Erickson states this well in saying, "The real human being is not what we now find in human society. The real human is the being that came from the hand of God, unspoiled by sin and the fall."<sup>5</sup>

Of all the creatures God created, human beings were most affected by this transformation, for their hearts changed focus and rather than being able to live out God's design and desire, they became self-conscious and self-centered. Everything changed. It is fair to say that ever since the Fall, the human race has been aware that something's missing and there has been an ongoing quest to find out what that is. Scripture, history, and theologians have identified that what is missing is God being the first love in our lives.

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<sup>4</sup> The NIV Study Bible, New International Version, Kenneth L. Barker, gen. ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985). Throughout this paper all Biblical references will be cited from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker House Books, 1983), 496.

Humanity consistently lives against the very first commandment, the one Jesus said was the priority, " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment" (Mt 22:37-38). We are too busy to take the time to seek out God to fill the void. Instead humans, who are created to fit God's design, try other things that are ill fitted to make us whole. It is time for another transformation to take place – a reversal of where sin has brought us. Our need is to return to God's design and desire for us. To get a clue as to what that design and desire might be we look at the creation account.

In the creation account found in Genesis 1, each of the six acts of creation concludes with this saying, "And there was evening, and there was morning — the first (second, third, etc.) day." After the six days of creation, Genesis 2:2-3 tells us that, "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done." In the beginning God created a rhythm of time. Into this rhythm of time everything was given life. God always intended for life to be driven by God's rhythm.

On the sixth day of creation God said "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:26-27). In the beginning God created humans in God's own divine image to bear God's likeness on the earth. This reveals our true identity as humans on the earth. We are God's image bearers here, where we live.

In the account of God bringing before Adam all of the creatures for him to name, it is discovered that there is no appropriate helper for him. God brought forth from Adam a woman to be his companion and helpmeet (Gen 2:19-22). In the beginning God created human beings to live in fellowship with one another just as the Father, Son and

Holy Spirit have always been a fellowship. Humanity was created with a need for one another.

God created humanity to live within God's design: God's boundaries of time, to live out his image on the earth, to live in fellowship with one another. God designed the planet to live within this model. But as soon as sin came into the picture there ensued a fight against God's desire and design. The gap has grown wider and deeper and the world God created for God's pleasure attempts to draw further and further away from its Creator. In general, humanity has no regard for God's rhythm or God's will. We cannot see God when we look in the mirror. We are in the midst of a growing tendency to withdraw from one another.

The North American church and societies have completely lost touch with Sabbath. There is no rest. There is no re-creation. There is no time for worship. The bulk of today's communities live in a 24/7 environment where nothing stops. As a result North Americans are exhausted and weary consumers who can't seem to cease for anything. As a society, we are killing ourselves and the image God had for us when God breathed us into being.

The absence of Sabbath is stunting humanity's spiritual formation as God intended us to grow. Spiritual formation requires being still, listening, allowing God space to invade our lives and shape it, but the tendency is to run away. Our society is in a spiritual drought and individuals, the church and society as a whole needs to be watered. Sabbath keeping may be a starting point for re-developing a rhythm of life that is God-centered and life giving.

Our society is continually distancing itself from God. Having lost touch with the truth that humans are beings created in God's image for God's purpose, people believe that each individual is in charge of their own destiny, and there is no need of anyone's help to get there. Humanity has grown selfish and independent, growing far from God.

But God has not given up on humanity and still desires to be in relationship with us. The question is, "Are we willing to go back to God on God's terms?" These terms are laid out in Scripture. They are terms made possible for all of humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These are terms that God put in place at the beginning of time.

God's terms require being in relationship with God. Humans were made for relationship with their Creator. That relationship was made possible through Jesus Christ. But that relationship only becomes reality if individuals are willing to enter into it. Many people accept a relationship with Jesus Christ, and this opens the door for spiritual transformation in that person's life. But many people stop at that relationship of salvation and never grow beyond it. True transformation never happens for them. God wants more for humanity and invites us into a growing, life altering relationship with God. For those who choose to pursue this relationship, life changes and they are transformed and restored to God in ways that are deep in the soul.

Spiritual disciplines are tools that help those who want to grow deep with God. These disciplines come in many forms, and any, when practiced, can lead us into the heart of God. But all of the disciplines will take time and focus if they are going to lead to change in our lives. Today's society is often too much in a hurry to take the time to practice disciplines of any sort as society finds itself consistently running the red lights. Because of all this rushing society has become disoriented and in order to become reoriented there will need to be changes. These changes all involve being restored to how humanity was designed to be by God. In his *Confessions*, Augustine writes, "Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee."<sup>6</sup> Believing this to be true of all humanity, one would

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<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*, trans. Edward B. Pusey, (New York: Collier Books, 1975), 11.

conclude that returning to our created intent should be easy – we all have a yearning to go there, whether it is acknowledged or not – but the catch is that it will take time and effort. The kind of time it will particularly take is Sabbath time. The effort is the preparation it takes mentally, physically and spiritually to make a space for Sabbath time. If Christians would commit themselves to seeking out and practicing God's rhythm of work and rest, they would experience the transformation that leads to restoration of soul, mind and body and in turn would impact the rest of society. Redefining ourselves as those made in God's image will take time. It will require time spent with God, and while this may happen at any moment of the day, Sabbath time is key in being able to look in the mirror and see the image of God in our reflections.

Does God's intention at the time of creation still have bearing on our lives today? God has not changed. God's rhythm is still the same, humanity is still created in God's image, and we still need one another. Is there hope of restoration to God's intention for us? Although God's intent applies to all of humanity, this study is focused on those who already have a relationship with God and are seeking to live lives of discipleship. Most people have a vague awareness that they are out of sync but are not willing to do anything "real" about it. Many people both within and out of the faith community know they long for a rhythm that includes work and rest, busyness and stillness. They sense that they were made to live in that rhythm, but our society has not taught them how to do that. Today's society uses band-aids on the problems of time, identity, and need for community when what is necessary is a complete renovation.

An Amazon.com<sup>7</sup> search reveals a girth of books on Sabbath keeping (6,706), rest and relaxation (9,042), finding purpose and meaning (15,914), spirituality (220,851), overcoming busyness (16,299), and encountering stillness (141,437), tells us that a yearning to reconnect with God and to find a different pace in life is present in our world

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<sup>7</sup> Amazon.com, Amazon.com, Inc., 1996-2011, <http://www.amazon.com> (accessed January 6, 2010).

today. Harassed and harried, people of today's society are hungry for change, and this quest is felt not only in the church community but in the secular community as well. The fact is that for transformation to occur, for humanity to return to what God designed us for, it will require a renewed discipline. That will require effort, which sounds like work, which sounds like a move in the opposite direction from the slowing down of Sabbath. But it is more than busy work and something else to incorporate into already overloaded routines. It is really a discipline, which Scripture tells us is good for us.

Ignoring our need to keep Sabbath results in the loss of identity as God's creation, loss of living in God's rhythm, and loss of fellowshiping as God's community.

### **The Loss of Identity**

God created human beings, on purpose, to bring God glory. God is glorified when humans respond to God in obedience to how God designed and desired them to be. God created humans in God's own image, and this is our true identity. In the deformation that came with the fall, human beings withdrew from glorifying God. Humanity ceased loving like God loved us. Somewhere along the line, we became more interested in the here and now than in eternity. And we forgot about our relationship with the earth, seeking to dominate it for our own gain rather than to practice stewardship over it on behalf of God.

As human beings we were created to pattern our life after God. This includes the opportunity to work and rest. But when humanity is out of sync with God's will and intention, we grow to be off balance. We lose the balance between work and rest. We lose sight of being made in God's image. Tilden Edwards says, "When we cease from work, we show ourselves to be labor's master."<sup>8</sup> But when there is no stopping in our work, we are mastered by it and do not reflect the image of God as fully. As members of

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<sup>8</sup> Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, (Nashville: Upper Room, 1992), 64.

contemporary society, we believe we need to get it all done now because these moments on earth are all we have. While each day of life on earth is precious, there is more. There is a future, for we who believe, that includes being in the very presence of God and living forever there.

Christians make a mistake when we believe we must spend ourselves fully right now. Jesus tells us “store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Mt 6:19-21) because there is life beyond what we can see around us and we are to be prepared for that ongoing life that awaits us. When Christians refuse to stop and rest, it reveals that we are too focused on the here and now and tend to ignore God’s call to live in such a manner now that prepares us for what follows when we leave this world’s realm.

There is an example of the eternal mindset in the European Middle Ages. “Then the vast majority of people had short and uncomfortable lives, yet they seemed to luxuriate in time and to maintain the capacity for celebrating life’s abundance, for they believed that this brief bodily existence was but a fraction of an eternal life possessed by every living creature.”<sup>9</sup> That is the mindset required to embrace our eternal quality. Adopting this view of our eternal identity would reshape how we spend the hours of each day and week.

Many Christians join the common throng in being inattentive to life beyond planet earth. This is evident in the way we spend our time with the goal to get everything in as soon as possible. And so we rush on but are frustrated when we feel the pull of the truth whispering, “But you were made for something else”.

The following journal entry was written on the morning after the end of our first Doctor or Ministry residency:

And so it comes to an end; this gift of time and space focused on a gracious God.  
And an encouragement from God: An encouragement that you can come away

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<sup>9</sup> Gary Eberle, *Sacred Time and the Search for Meaning*, (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2003), xiv.



with me in the midst of your common life. Do not hesitate to come away with me. Stop whatever you are doing and be present to me. Never think it a waste of time to stop and draw near to me. It is what I am always wanting my Beloved. I will always be watching for you to come.<sup>10</sup>

God desires us to come to him because God created us for fellowship with him. That is part of our physical and spiritual makeup to be drawn into fellowship with God. But reconnecting with God and our true identity takes time and we are hesitant to take that time to be with God and be reminded of God's image reflected in ours. Today's Christians run instead to try to find themselves at the gym, at the social gathering, at our jobs, at any other place we perceive we will find our worth. We run from the fellowship that gives us our true identity and meaning. We see the warning and invitation of the yellow light and after a moment of doubt, we plow on through.

### **The Loss of Rhythm**

There are many ways humanity can find itself out of sync with God's rhythm. God declared it night when the sun set. We declare it night after the eleven o'clock news. God declared it morning when the sun rose and the cock crowed. We decide it's morning when the alarm goes off on the weekday or whenever we're good and ready for it to be morning on the weekend.

There is a daily rhythm God invites the human race into as well as weekly and yearly rhythms. We can identify the rhythms in the seasons and what the flora and fauna do around us. Left on their own, they worship God by obeying the rhythms God set for them. We humans are another story all together. Attention should be given to daily rhythms as they help to prepare us to keep the weekly rhythm including a day of Sabbath rest.

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<sup>10</sup> Karen Ballard, Personal Journal, January 27, 2007.

In his book, *The Sabbath*, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says, "Time to us is a measuring device rather than a realm in which we abide."<sup>11</sup> One of the major premises in his book is that people get time and space confused, and this is what contributes to being out of rhythm. Space involves acquisition of material wealth, power, and control. We use time to acquire these things, but then they become the priority and we become slaves to them – having to work through the holidays and weekends so that we can "have". Humans living in today's North American culture have a difficult time trying to "abide" within the twenty four hours a day that are given us, and space shoulders out the sacredness of time by becoming our priority. "Indeed, we know what to do with space but do not know what to do about time, except to make it subservient to space."<sup>12</sup> We live as if "things" are sacred, and time is not. Ignoring God's design for rhythm in the world and in our lives, we spend our time pursuing things rather than resting and being with God. We make all time un-holy and grow distant from the heart and desire of God.

In the majority of Christian practice, we abandon the idea that God might have set a rhythm of work and rest on purpose. Our fallen selves tend to fight against the truth that there is something good in ceasing from busyness and instead being fully present to our Creator. Because this disrespect for time has become habit, it is difficult to try to reclaim the time. People feel helpless to stand against it. Most people, whether they be Christians or not, are not convinced that they should stand against it. The further we get from the time in American history in which Blue Laws were in effect, the further we get from the hope of restoring a rhythm of work and rest in the lives of Christians and the society they live in.

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<sup>11</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 96.

<sup>12</sup> Heschel, 5.

At some point in time there must be a surrender to the rhythm allowing it to govern how time is spent. Until then there will be a fight against that rhythm. This awareness came during a beach vacation and was recorded in a journal:

"It's a tactile experience! I feel the different types of sand. I hear the waves. I wade in the water and must surrender to the rhythm in order to enjoy it."<sup>13</sup>

The lesson observed was that to fight constantly against the waves is what one does when trying to survive them and get to shore, but to enjoy them one is simply carried along by them. There's a difference in how this feels physically, and emotionally.

Fighting the waves causes stress, but being carried by them is relaxing and renewing.

As a culture, we fight the wave of God's rhythm and are constantly striving against the current.

Fear is a factor that must be acknowledged and dealt with if the loss of rhythm is to be recovered. There are common fears of surrendering to an unfamiliar rhythm. Aware that it will be difficult, afraid that one may not be able to get it right, the notion is rejected and the frantic pace continues. Another set of fears might stem from what others might say if they discovered we weren't doing anything "productive".

Upon approaching an intentional Sabbath the subject was brought up within the context of a small spiritual direction group. "In the sharing I spoke about Sabbath and my perceived struggles with the upcoming one. They heard a child longing to play, struggling with an adult who wanted control and order. No surprise."<sup>14</sup>

There is an element of childlikeness in surrendering to the Sabbath rhythm. It's as if the children are trying to appear all grown up and self-sufficient in front of the Parent who longs to have playtime with their children. This too is an indication of our loss of identity. We have forgotten that God has a longing for the children God created

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<sup>13</sup> Ballard, August 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Ballard, April 22, 2007.

as well. We are not the only ones we hurt by our continued busyness, it is a rejection of God and the gifts God desires to give the whole of creation in Sabbath.

Denying time for the Sabbath of worship and rest, denies humanity the opportunity to tend to matters of the soul. God intended the Sabbath for our good. The six days of work were meant to complement the day of rest. "What would the world be without Sabbath? It would be a world that knew only itself or God distorted as a thing or the abyss separating him from the world; a world without the vision of a window in eternity that opens into time."<sup>15</sup> And thus is humanity becoming. A world with a distorted view of God accompanied by a distorted view of ourselves which sees us as gods and the Creator of time and space as subservient to us and our whims.

### **The Loss of Community**

Community and fellowship are words that define groups of people who are united by purpose, likeness, vicinity, or relationship. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit have always existed as a community. When God created Adam, God was in relationship with him from the beginning. While the man was in community with God, it became obvious that the man needed community with like beings too and so woman was created. This teaches us that relationships do not only happen vertically but horizontally – humans need one another to be completely who God designed us to be and to have a living model of how relationships shape and mold us. Ironically, in losing our sense of need for God comes the idea that we do not really need one another either. Breaking fellowship with God is often accompanied by breaking away from the community that follows God. Although one might be lonely, one prefers to be alone where there is less to risk, less chance of hurt, less need to extend oneself on behalf of another, less

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<sup>15</sup> Heschel, 16.

demand on our time and resources. Withdrawing from God and others results in the loss of the community humanity was designed to be a part of.

Community can be threatening. If a person brings their whole self into fellowship with others, imperfections might be noticed. Also there is the likelihood that someone will ask something of that individual and we are not sure we want to give of ourselves that way. Reflecting on a communion service during the second residency of the Spiritual Formation Doctor of Ministry track began to bring about a slow, transforming sort of recognition that in the church we really do belong to one another:

A reflection on communion yesterday: As we sat in a circle watching Steve break the bread, it dawned on me that our group is the broken body of Christ for each other too! And we sure are broken! In so many ways! That was significant to me yesterday. The people of God are also the 'body of Christ'. When we are broken for each other community happens and it also creates space for true healing to take place and forgiveness to happen.<sup>16</sup>

A true community provides a safety net, but there is always risk involved.

Communities tend to ebb and flow. People come and go, life events occur which prohibit once active persons from being involved for a time; the focus of the group may shift or try a new way of being. All of these threaten security and stability. Then there are temporary communities that we wish could last forever but are designed to be temporary to serve a particular purpose.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, when one dares to give themselves to a community of faith, and experiences the benefits, one catches a glimpse of what true community could be like and the heart yearns for more. But the tendency today is towards isolation. The risk may not be worth the benefits or people choose to go with communities that have less at risk than a spiritual community. It is easier to pack a bus of people for a trip to see the Yankees play than it is to get church members to come out for a potluck dinner and time of fellowship.

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<sup>16</sup> Ballard. January 22, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> The Spiritual Formation of Ministry Leaders Doctor of Ministry cohort has proven to be one such group for many.

It seems that as a society, we do not want God to see us broken and we surely do not want others in the church to see our true selves, so those are the relationships we withdraw from. It reduces the risk but also the benefit of community. There are many losses that come along with this choice but the one that pertains to this topic is the loss of keeping Sabbath, and conversely community diminishes as people choose not to keep Sabbath. One of the only pieces we retain of Sabbath is gathering as congregations in churches. But as pulls for our time increase, that community disintegrates. Maybe a family will give an hour of the day to God and God's people before rushing off to shop or participate in sports or their own leisure, but there will not be time allotted for fellowship, rest, or further devotion to God.

God's community, the church, is uniquely called to be keepers of the Sabbath. It is a foreign concept in today's world, but those who follow God are told in Scripture that they are strangers and aliens in this world's realm and are to be different (1 Pet 2:11). Even among those deeply committed to the faith community there is a lack of conviction about keeping the Sabbath. In the Rome Presbyterian Church, Sabbath is interpreted as a good idea that can be kept when convenient but may yield to other commandments. If your parents need help to dig up their potatoes on a Sunday, that's what you do because it's important to honor your parents.<sup>18</sup> There is a lack of seeing it as a priority, and the mindset portrayed in the aforementioned illustration is that it is more important to honor parents than it is to honor God. There is not the awareness that we need the community in order to be faithful to the fourth commandment, but neither is there conviction that we *need* to keep the Sabbath.

Sabbath keeping is difficult for an individual to attempt. Without a deep conviction that we are called by God to keep it, just as much as we are called not to murder, we will not even give it a second thought. But the difficulty is compounded when

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<sup>18</sup> This is based on a conversation in the group studying Sabbath keeping.

we are on our own. Without the support of others who are like-minded, there is no encouragement to keep the Sabbath. If we are even going to attempt to “remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Ex 20:8), we need to be with others of the same mindset who will help us say “no” to those things which would pull us away.

### **Listening To What Others Say**

Many have written on the topic of Sabbath keeping from a variety of angles. Following is a discussion involving some of their thoughts on why Sabbath practice is vanishing from our society and our Christian discipleship.

There are many reasons that Sabbath is ignored. As a community we are busy, we are needed, we don't think it's important or we think we are observing the day as God desires by attending worship before attending to everything else we need to get done. In *Sabbath*, Dan B. Allender, assuming that God dictates that we are to observe Sabbath in a way that honors God and brings delight to the keeper, suggests one reason that Sabbath is dismissed. “Few people are willing to enter the Sabbath and sanctify it, to make it holy, because a full day of delight and joy is more than most people can bear in a lifetime, let alone a week.”<sup>19</sup> But how many people associate the Sabbath with a day full of delight? That is not what has been taught, but rather that it is a day of duty to God and responsibility to family. As people reflect on their Sabbath memories joy is missing more often than not, as their experience was focused on what you could not do rather than what you were invited to embrace. Perhaps Allender is right even though Christians may not be aware of it. What might happen if the people of God caught onto the idea that God's desire for us was to experience delight on the Sabbath? It might not transform the church but it would at least give people the opportunity to grapple with the

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<sup>19</sup> Don B. Allender, *Sabbath*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 5.

notion that God really loves them and wants what is best for them, and part of that involves stopping on the Sabbath.

But as the prophet Isaiah says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord" (Is 55:8). We are prone to push away from God's desire for us. Tilden Edwards identifies a rhythm that beats counter to the one God instituted, "a rhythm between driven achievement time and compensatory escape time by people trapped in a self-produced, isolated sense of personal reality."<sup>20</sup> He then goes on to list four leading contributors to the "erosion" of Sabbath as: "American pluralism, forms of individualism, changing views of time, and the devaluation of the contemplative."<sup>21</sup> This supports that American Christians have travelled far from God's desired rest for us, the original practice of Sabbath, and even the interpretations our ancestors brought to America. We are far removed from understanding and expectation of what might happen in and through us should we yield our busyness to the gift of God called Sabbath.

Norman Wirzba addresses our decline from fit and fulfilled people in *Living the Sabbath*. He suggests these questions as we think about the state we're in and our unhappiness: "What is our living finally for? Why do we commit to so much? Why do we devote ourselves to the tasks or priorities that we do? Will we know when we've achieved or acquired enough? What purpose does our striving serve?"<sup>22</sup> It is because we are inattentive to these questions that we experience the losses of community, identity, and rhythm. As a society, we are too attached to our own ability to accomplish to think about letting go of the pursuit even for a short while to breathe. Heschel talks about Sabbath keeping requiring an amount of detachment as well as attachment to

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<sup>20</sup> Edwards, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Edwards, 43.

<sup>22</sup> Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 20.



something out of our week's routine. He sees the Sabbath as "a day of detachment from things, instruments and practical affairs as well as of attachment to the spirit."<sup>23</sup> But we are so unwilling to let go of what makes us feel secure (our work and busyness) our full hands cannot reach for where true security lies. Lacking the trust that God placed the red light in our lives for our good, we proceed to rush on through the intersection instead of resting. As a society, as the church, as individuals, all of us pretend that we have made it unscathed through the red lights and gotten so far ahead when in reality we have all wrecked and are travelling down the road with bent fenders, blown tires, missing doors and smashed headlights.

Unwilling to count the cost of what we have lost and continue to lose, humanity forges ahead, busy as ever, and taking pride in it. And the God who created us for God's purpose, who invites the creation to stop, worship, rest, be in community, and know ourselves, grieves our absence and our insistence at rejecting the good gift of Sabbath time that God has given us.

The next chapter will look at the problem and the hypothesis from a biblical and theological perspective. A chapter involving other authors who have something to say about the topic of Sabbath keeping will follow that. Chapter Four will describe the project undertaken to test the hypothesis. The final chapter will interpret the results of the project.

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<sup>23</sup> Heschel, 29.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **GOD'S REALITY: SCRIPTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR SABBATH KEEPING**

Turning attention to the Biblical and theological support for Sabbath keeping, three themes will help frame the conversation. These three themes, which were introduced in chapter one, are identity, rhythm, and community. These three themes were instilled in humanity at creation and lost at the fall, but can be restored as persons are transformed through a relationship with Jesus Christ and a life of discipleship that would include keeping the Sabbath. Beyond these three themes this chapter will look at the eternal Sabbath rest written of in the fourth chapter of Hebrews. Two other issues, Sabbath in the Old and New Covenants and the argument between Saturday or Sunday for Christian Sabbath keeping will be handled in the following chapter.

#### **Identity**

##### **Made in the Image of God**

In God's plan for creating the world, God had a desire to be in unique fellowship with a particular part of creation. God chose that part to be humanity. God chose us. This unique fellowship would require that humanity have completely different qualities from the rest of what had been made. So God said:

'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26-27)

Humanity is made in God's image because God desired us to be created like God so that God could live in unique fellowship with us.

The first question in the Westminster Larger Catechism asks: "What is the chief and highest end of man?" The answer given to that question is one of the most joyous answers in all of Christendom. It reads: "Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God,

and fully to enjoy Him forever.”<sup>1</sup> According to the Westminster Divines, God created humanity for the purpose of fellowship with God, to glorify God and enjoy God. These things are possible because God created humans in God’s image. Because we are created like God, we can know some of the things that make God tick, what brings God pleasure and what brings God sorrow. Then it is the aim of humanity to live in the type of fellowship that we were created for, bringing glory to God, and enjoying ourselves while doing it.

In his book *Divine Rest For Human Restlessness*, Samuele Bacchiocchi supports the point that from the beginning humankind has been living out this truth:

Adam’s first full day of life was the seventh day which, one can legitimately assume, he spent not working but celebrating with his Maker the inauguration of the completed and perfect creation. This assumption rests on the fact that man was created to live in accordance with the “image” and example of his Creator (Gen. 1:26). In fact, in the Fourth Commandment, the injunction to work and to rest is based upon man’s responsibility to imitate the pattern established by God at the creation week (Ex. 20:8-11).<sup>2</sup>

Humans are also made to be God’s agents on this planet. Because we are made in God’s image, we are able to discern God’s will and purposes. Through prayer and Scripture we know how to live out God’s desire for the planet and, at our best that is the path we pursue. It requires though, that we practice God’s rhythm, the rhythm of work and rest, going and stopping, doing and being. Observing the red lights placed in our journey.

There is great significance in God choosing to create humanity in God’s own image. It implies that we were created to reflect God’s work in our working and to reflect God’s rest in our resting. The rhythm of the week of creation is our rhythm too. We work six days, we cease from working for one day and we are present to that seventh day

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<sup>1</sup> Book of Confessions, *The Larger Catechism* (Louisville, Kentucky: The Office of the General Assembly of the PCUSA, 2002), 195.

<sup>2</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi. *Divine Rest For Human Restlessness: A Theological Study Of The Good News Of The Sabbath For Today*, (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1980), 20-21.

differently than the other six because God set it apart for us. Being made in God's image, we mimic the rhythm God breathed into the world, God's holy rhythm. We reflect the glory of God, who God is and how God acts. In *The Sabbath: It's Permanence, Promise and Defence*, W. W. Everts writes:

Association of the Sabbath with divine example in creation must have been intended to hallow the day for all mankind alike, to the end of time. It bases the ordinance upon the likeness of the creature to the Creator in the mode of his activities, as well as in his intelligence, freedom, and moral sense.<sup>3</sup>

Abraham Heschel states that part of our problem is that humanity has exchanged the sacredness of time for the sacredness of space.<sup>4</sup> With the fall came the need to conquer space, to tame it. But God particularly hallowed time, in a way that space does not share:

There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to win but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern.<sup>5</sup>

The reality of sin has led humanity to attempt to conquer space and to do that time must be captured and made to serve humankind, so we fight against sacred time, ignoring the holy day that God set apart for rest, fellowship, and worship.

### The Sin that Separates Humanity from God's Design

Although there is no record of exactly when sin entered the world, one would assume it was soon after God's creative work was done. One would like to think that Adam and Eve were getting the hang of living in God's rhythm for a while before it all changed. It would be nice to believe that they enjoyed the paradise they were given and the unique fellowship with God they were gifted with before they chose to listen to

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<sup>3</sup> W. W. Everts, *The Sabbath: It's Permanence, Promise and Defence*, (New York: Fleming D. Revell, 1885), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Heschel, 3.

another voice and disobeyed. Scripture tells us that there was a time when Satan entered the garden and wooed the man and woman away from God to seek their own power, to live in their own wisdom and strength.

In his systematic theology, Millard Erickson defines sin thusly, “. . . the essence of sin is simply failure to let God be God.”<sup>6</sup> What words did Satan use to lure Eve into taking the fruit? “. . . when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, . . .” (Gen 3:5). Satan encouraged discontentment with letting God be God. He instilled the notion that maybe it would be good for the human creatures to be more like God than God intended them to be. It was a powerful suggestion and succeeded in convincing the woman to walk away from the trust she had in God being God and thus sin entered the world. It continues today when we refuse to glorify God or enjoy God, we are committing sin. Today’s Christians do this when refusing to stop and practice Sabbath. This drives a wedge between the Creator and creature. If God is not being glorified, then something lesser is. If God is not being enjoyed, then those created in the image of God are focused on other things to bring joy and worshipping the creation rather than the Creator. If we are not able to trust God with one day of the week, in which we are not productive, we are in sin. We are failing to let God be God.

Humans are well into the habit of sin. Although there is nothing new under the sun, within the last forty years sin has become more and more acceptable in North American society. As a society in general, we seem to be more tolerant of sin and seemingly more comfortable with it. Ceasing to allow God to be God, we set up lesser idols in God’s place and call it good. Blind to the sin that encompasses us we seem to be happy that way. But we are also blind to how near we draw to the cliffs of our extinction as we run about merrily on our way, unaware of the nearby danger. Erickson

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<sup>6</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker House Books, 1983), 580.

has developed some terms that define the consequences of our sin. Reading them, one can reflect on the state of our society and make the connection that humans do, in general, live in a world governed by sinful nature and self will.

The first is "Agitation or Restlessness".<sup>7</sup> The concept comes from the Hebrew word *resha'* which is best translated as "wickedness" and applies to those who are doing acts of wickedness in the world. "The wicked therefore are to be seen as causing agitation and discomfort for themselves and for others as well. They live in chaotic confusion and bring similar disorder into the lives of those close to them."<sup>8</sup> This can be seen plainly all around us. It can be seen in criminal situations. It is present in the lives of children living in poor home conditions. It is evident as corporations choose to be open around the clock and require employees to work those hours so that there is a complete loss of rhythm for their lives. It resides with families who live with alcoholics, drug addicts and workaholics. It is experienced in the frenzied pace of our school and community sports activities. Everything is out of order, out of pace, out of rhythm. This is a result of sin and our being drawn into it. But rather than reject this practice as wicked, our congregations buckle their seat belts, steps on the accelerator and tries to keep up with the rest of the traffic feeling validated in the harried pace along with everyone else in society.

Wickedness is subtle. Christians have learned to identify many wicked things as "gray areas". Refusing to identify them as wrong we buffer them with the color gray so that we can ignore them and not have to deal with them and we can let them exist and not have to stand against them. But who does that benefit? It does not honor God and it surely does not benefit those who are made in God's image, but rather than stand against what is wicked, we tolerate it. Sports on Sunday are a necessary evil. Having

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<sup>7</sup> Erickson, 575.

<sup>8</sup> Erickson, 576.

stores and restaurants open on Sunday is a necessary evil. But God gave us the Sabbath to step out of the busyness so that we could be still and focus on God. In general the majority of society lives as rebels. We are all guilty of being "wicked".

The second consequence which Erickson speaks of is "Evil or Badness" and comes from the generic Hebrew word, *ra'*. It can refer to anything that is harmful or malignant and implies that there is a choice in doing evil or good.<sup>9</sup> This can be seen in any household with children. Daily these children choose whether they will be kind to their sibling or terrorize them. Along with the choice they make comes a consequence: there is either peace and harmony or someone gets sent to their room. When one looks at the media it appears that our world is bent on choosing evil over and over again but that the consequences for those deliberate actions are not fully experienced in ways that we can see. God cannot be seen at work in any of these situations because the great majority of people, Christian or not, have chosen not to look for God.

A key word in this definition of sin is "choice". Every human being has a choice to select what is evil or what is good. A good choice would be one that always allows God to be God and results in trusting God to take care of things that are beyond control at any given moment. An evil choice would be stepping into God's role to take care of what we assume needs to be done regardless of how it reflects one's trust of God. Each human, but especially each Christian is able to choose whether or not to keep Sabbath.

The next consequence of sin that Erickson points out is "Guilt". "The idea in this . . . is that harm has been done by the act of sin, and there must be some form of restitution to set matters right." The Hebrew word is *'asham* and is defined as "to do a wrong, to commit an offense, or to inflict an injury".<sup>10</sup> According to William Holladay the

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<sup>9</sup> Erickson, 576.

<sup>10</sup> Erickson, 576.

word is tied closely to the punishment that goes with the sin committed so that the acknowledgement of guilt is also an acceptance of the consequence.<sup>11</sup> God-given guilt is intended to move the sinner toward the action of repentance, but the tendency is to get stuck in the guilt and rather than do what would set things right, the sinner broods in their feeling of guilt. The tendency is to focus on the “should haves”. As reflective Christians we might say that we “should have” re-scheduled the game. We “should have” stood up to the coach. We “should have” said no to that extra shift. But instead we just feel guilty for what we did do. As Christians and as a society we are good at feeling guilt but are very slow to repent. Consequently, nothing changes. Sin remains as we neglect to do what honors God’s will or continue to act in ways that disregard God’s desire. We miss the bit about restitution needing to happen. Rather than make it right the choice is to stay in sin because it is perhaps easier than rocking the boat or causing a fuss. This unhealthy behavior pulls humanity more deeply into itself and away from God. It’s as if we forget that there is another way to live in which humans are redeemed from their sins and forgiven for their mistakes not stuck with them forever.

The final consequence of sin that Erickson brings forth is “Trouble”. “The underlying idea is that sin brings trouble upon the sinner. . . . The Hebrew term (*‘aven*) appears to bear the idea of consequent misery, trouble, difficulty and sorrow.”<sup>12</sup> The illustration that comes to mind is the cycle of the poor in Bradford County, PA. Women make decisions to have babies that they cannot afford or take care of. They call the church for help, desperate because their heat is going to get cut off, and their children will be cold. They cannot find jobs because they have no skills. They have nowhere else to go because their families have disowned them. The father of the child left long

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<sup>11</sup> William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 29.

<sup>12</sup> Holladay, 29.



ago. They have used all the other aid available to them and they are truly stuck. Their situation is heartbreaking, and there is an obvious pattern to the path they have taken. They made choices that got them into a cycle of trouble, which continues to breed more.

When persons of faith neglect Sabbath keeping we bring on trouble for ourselves. There is often regret about a day of rest missed. There is sorrow about not being able to worship as a family. There is exhaustion and frustration due to a lack of down time and the ability of the family to be grouped together in repose at least for one day a week. There is often a lack of peace. The folly of the sin is felt in tangible ways.

In 1997, Rev. Maurice Roberts of Inverness, Scotland preached a sermon titled "The Folly of Sabbath Breaking" in which he argues that while it is sin to break the Sabbath it is primarily foolishness to not keep Sabbath. He states his reasons for believing this is so:

Sabbath breaking is the needless doing of things on the Lord's Day, which are inconsistent with the purpose for which that Day was appointed by God. Conversely, Sabbath breaking is the unjustifiable neglect of those things on the Lord's Day which the will of God requires.<sup>13</sup>

As long as humans sin, they will live with the folly of that sin, which is living outside of God's will. Something is required to break the cycle of sin to save us from our folly. First God gave the Law, that in obedience, the people might return to a right relationship with God. But ultimately God required Jesus Christ to save humanity, and Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to transform us. The Holy Spirit imparts different means of grace by which humanity is transformed, but we still have the option of receiving those gifts or rejecting them. The Sabbath is such a gift, one meant to restore and balance us. This generation has generally dismissed it and is bearing the consequences of that sin as a society and as individuals. Without the Sabbath and all that God established it for, we live outside of our true identity.

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<sup>13</sup> Maurice Roberts, "The Folly of Sabbath Breaking", (sermon preached during Pre-Assembly Rally in Inverness, Scotland). [bostontheological.org/programs/maurice-roberts-on-the-sabbath.doc](http://bostontheological.org/programs/maurice-roberts-on-the-sabbath.doc) January 5, 1997.

## Humanity Must be Transformed to Once More Reflect the Image of God

The cycle of sin is broken when a person comes to faith in Jesus Christ.

Justification, God's work of justifying humanity by God's grace, is the starting point of transformation and restoration to the image of humanity that God has in mind. Some folks in the church are content to accept that they are justified before God by God's grace and forgiven of their sins, but have no intention or desire to be transformed by that action. It may be that they were never told that they were intended to grow in their faith or they were told and ignored it. But God has more in mind for humankind than our justification. Once someone receives the salvation that comes from Christ, the Spirit begins the work of sanctification in that person's life. Through the Christian's commitment to spiritual disciplines and the Holy Spirit's commitment to work in us for God's glory, we are transformed.

Sabbath keeping is one of those spiritual disciplines needed to allow God's sanctifying activity to be effective in our lives. In Ezekiel 20:12, God says, through the prophet, "Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so that they would know that I the Lord made them holy." The Hebrew word used here, *miqdash*, means "sanctuary" but the NIV translates it as "making them holy". Here it is not referring to a physical building but God's people and the transforming power of God at work in them to make them who they are supposed to be. Other translations of Scripture translate the word "sanctify"<sup>14</sup>. Through the Sabbath, God is working to make his people a sanctuary – a holy place where God can dwell. It is the work of sanctification that accomplishes this. Ignoring Sabbath robs Christians of an opportunity to be made holy by God. God requires of us time to do God's work in us.

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<sup>14</sup> See: King James Bible, American King James Version, American Standard Version, English Revised Version, Young's Literal Translation.

Although God can work in and through us all the time, God uniquely sets apart Sabbath time for us. As Heschel points out, we are quite consumed with conquering space but at the peril of losing the sacredness of time.<sup>15</sup> Heschel states that if we are to understand what the Bible is teaching about Sabbath, “one must accept its’ premise that time has a meaning for life which is at least equal to that of space”<sup>16</sup>. The sacredness of time is important and yet we ignore it daily and weekly because we can. God built into the rhythm of the world a day set apart for worship, rest, and community where God can meet with God’s favored creatures and make them holy. It is when we intentionally stop at this intersection and linger that we can be still before God with the people of God and together we can hear God speak and together we can experience the work God is doing in us. We offer God time to work in and in this time God chooses to continue God’s ongoing work of sanctifying us.

The truth be told, what people “do” throughout the week shapes them, living out their lives as “human-doings” rather than “human-beings”. But it is in being rather than doing that God’s work of sanctification can transform humanity. It may sound contradictory, but as God’s own, when we rest securely in God’s justifying work in our lives we make time for him to continue the work of sanctification. When we apply the brake to our lives to observe the red light of the Sabbath, we are being who God saved us to be. But ordinarily, we use the time we’ve been given not to pursue God but to conquer space, to acquire things, to try to rule the world. Abraham Heschel challenges our bent to gain control in his prologue to his book *The Sabbath*:

There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Heschel, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Heschel, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Heschel, 3.

Humanity is out of kilter with the divine purpose when we live to “do” rather than “be”. God through the psalmist encourages us to “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10) which is what we must keep before us if we are to surrender our will to God’s and be changed into God’s likeness, transformed into God’s desire and design for us.

Referring again to Ezekiel 20:12, God set the Sabbath as a sign – a stop sign – so that the people of God would remember that their God has made them holy. It is not what they’ve done or are striving to accomplish but rather God’s grace at work in their lives.

So ideally, the Sabbath is kept because God ordained it for the good of God’s creation and through it, God works to make humanity holy. God uses Sabbath time in a unique way to shape and form us into beings that reflect God’s image. Our role in this is to surrender to it, to keep the day, to honor God by making the day holy and to regain our identity.

## **Rhythm**

### **Sabbath Keeping as the Creation Mandate**

When the topic of keeping Sabbath is brought up one of the first arguments heard against it is that it is part of the old covenant and as Christians we are not bound by that covenant. Less common is the argument that God’s desire for Sabbath keeping comes before Moses came down Mount Sinai with the stone tablets. God’s design for all of creation – for all time – includes keeping the Sabbath. Here our attention will focus on Sabbath as the Creation Mandate.

The discussion needs to begin with Genesis 2:2-3, “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the

work of creating that he had done.” This is the creation mandate for keeping the Sabbath.

By the time humanity is introduced into God’s rhythm of space and time, God had been very busy creating everything else that preceded it. It is not because God grew weary that He needed to stop. It was for creation’s good that God stopped, and called special attention to the day. Because of that, all of humanity is to take notice of it, learn from it and practice it. God set forth a way for humanity to experience time and it would be well with the souls of all humankind if there would be a return to embrace the rhythm the world began with. Also it is important to pay attention to the particulars of the seventh day as it contrasts with the preceding six. God was done with this aspect of creation and God marked the completion of the task with a day of rest (Gen 2:1-3). God ceased from his work, God blessed the day, and God made the day holy.<sup>18</sup>

On this seventh day of the week God rested and set the example for all of creation to do likewise. It was the placing of a rhythmic pattern into the world God had made. There’s no indication that this pattern was temporary “until things got going” but that it was God’s intended rhythm for the duration of God’s creation and as a foretaste of what would be for eternity.

Everts supports this argument:

The divine blessing which consecrated the seventh part of time for the first generation must have consecrated it equally for all generations. . . . The aroma of that blessing has lingered through the ages, and diffused a fragrance of holiness over all lands. As there was no period to the blessing, there is no end to the Sabbath it consecrated. So long as God’s blessing is sought on earth the Sabbath will be hallowed.<sup>19</sup>

This pattern set at creation is for all time. Everts’ language of “divine blessing” is often neglected in the discussion of Sabbath keeping and replaced with the concept of duty.

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<sup>18</sup> Iain D. Campbell, *On The First Day of the Week: God, the Christian, and the Sabbath*, (Leominster: Day One Publications, 2005), 19.

<sup>19</sup> Everts, 14.

In resting God was involved in a “different form of existence, which involved no new work.”<sup>20</sup> In ceasing from his work God stopped making new things. The Creator obviously continued to maintain what had come into being, but didn’t make anything new after the sixth day. When humans rest and cease we still feed our family and care for daily needs but we refuse to be driven beyond that.

Failing to rest on the Sabbath keeps humanity from experiencing a different type of existence that God calls us into. Robert Odom suggests that the resting involved God reflecting on his handy work and that God was “well pleased with the beauty and perfection of His creative work . . . a product of his power, wisdom, and goodness, and as a manifestation of His glory.”<sup>21</sup> Like an artist who finishes a painting, God stepped back to look at and enjoy what had been done.

As created beings, resting will be experienced a little bit differently but it will still reflect God’s rest. Norman Wirzba describes one of these differences, “When we stop our work, what we are really doing is exhibiting a fundamental trust and faith in the goodness and praiseworthiness of God.”<sup>22</sup> In resting we quit fretting and let things be. This is what God did, trusting in the work of God’s hands that it was complete. While a person may feel their work is never complete, they can adopt the attitude that it’s done for the time being and then trust God to maintain things until the time to return to work.

Whereas God rested from creating, humans have other things that they rest from and this also sets us apart from God but reflects God as well. Marva Dawn lists different categories of rest that one might be involved in on any given Sabbath. These include:

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<sup>20</sup> Campbell, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Robert L. Odom, *Sabbath and Sunday In Early Christianity*, (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1977), 14.

<sup>22</sup> Norman Wirzba, *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 37-38.

spiritual, physical, emotional, intellectual, and social rest.<sup>23</sup> If one could truly rest in all these ways one would be better aligned with God's Spirit at the return of the work week.

Tilden Edwards describes yet another way that we reflect God's image in our resting:

When we cease from work, we show ourselves to be labor's master. Unlike the rest of creation that numbly spins on, we, by a conscious act of faith, can put a limit to our labor so that it does not degenerate into purposeless or compulsive drudgery. In such mastery we reflect the image of God.<sup>24</sup>

Adopting this view would indeed be a transformation for many people. There's no acknowledgement of viewing labor as the master and yet it is served and complained about but there is refusal to do anything about it. How simple that it could start with observing a day of rest.

Mark Buchanan says in his book *The Rest of God* that one thing Sabbath provides for us is time for being attentive to what God is doing and suggests "Maybe that's what God requires most from us: our attention."<sup>25</sup> No doubt. But when so many things and the pace we keep to stay on top of it all distract us is it any wonder that people are unable to hear God speak? Hearing God requires that we stop what we're doing and pay attention. This is a gift God wants us to receive through the keeping of the Sabbath, holy time within a holy day set apart for fellowship with God and rest.

The Hebrew word *barukh* is used to describe what God did to this particular day of the week. Holladay defines the action as "to fill with power".<sup>26</sup> So when God blessed the day he empowered the day and imbued it with unique aspects. God showed favor to this day of the week. God showed favor to his children by giving them this day as a

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<sup>23</sup> Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 51-94.

<sup>24</sup> Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2003), 64.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul By Restoring Sabbath*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 50.

<sup>26</sup> Holladay, 49.

blessing of rest and stopping. How do we reflect God's image in blessing the day? It doesn't seem that the church or her people feel very empowered by the day. One wonders what life would look like if we did. Would God's people be able to receive it for the gift it is, trust that they are to revel in the difference of the day, live more dearly towards God on the Sabbath and be refreshed by it all?

It is the Hebrew word *qadosh* that is used in Genesis 2:3 by which God sets this seventh day apart. It is a day to be singled out, ordained, kept from profane use.<sup>27</sup> Abraham Heschel comments on it's use here: "How extremely significant is the fact that it (*qadosh*) is applied to time."<sup>28</sup> It is time that is made holy. It is time that is empowered. It is this day that we are called into that God made uniquely sacred as He completed creation.

In making the day holy God set it apart for higher purposes than the other six days. Nothing else in creation was set apart for this distinction. Only this day, this seventh day, was made holy. This in itself should cause us to sit up and take notice of this seventh day; should call us to be curious about this set apart time of the week. God set an example for those made in God's image. God was teaching humanity how to rest and observe and enjoy the fruits of their labor. But as exemplified in Scripture over and over again, we humans are very good at ignoring God's word, example, and law.

The example God set for humanity was complete. God had completed the work of creation and so was free to rest in it and to enjoy what had been accomplished. There was nothing that was left undone, nothing hanging over God's head that was left unfinished. God had no need to tinker with things on this seventh day. The sky was just the right color blue at noontime and all the leaves on all the trees were just the right

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<sup>27</sup> Holladay, 312.

<sup>28</sup> Heschel, 9.



shapes, God needn't adjust them on this seventh day. The Creator just rested in the midst of it all.

It is difficult for contemporary Christians to follow this example. Many who are perfectionists or over-achievers find it difficult to leave well enough alone and find it difficult to come to a complete stop on the Sabbath to just enjoy what has been created during the rest of the week. Our culture has programmed us to run the red light rather than stop. Possibly there must be the acknowledgement that the best work has not been done during the week and there are many loose ends that need to be tied up. Those serious about following God's example in this regard, will strive to do their best all throughout the six days of work so that work can cease on the seventh and what has been accomplished can truly be enjoyed. Abraham Heschel suggests, "God has sanctified the day, and man must again and again sanctify the day . . ."<sup>29</sup> By honoring the Sabbath we too bless the day and honor God.

### Community

The people of God, coming out of slavery in Egypt were in need of a new identity. They needed to move beyond the past that united them as slaves, and the present that found them wandering in the wilderness. God gave them a new sense of being God's people when God set forth for them the law. They would be known anew as God's people, as the community of God, as they lived out the commands they had been given. Their obedience would set them apart.

None of the ten commandments were new. None of the commandments were terribly revolutionary. They stressed what was already important and defined for the Israelites what God felt was most important for them to practice as they lived together

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<sup>29</sup> Heschel, 54.

not just as any group of people, but as God's chosen people, set apart for God's purpose and work.

It is true that Scripture is silent on Sabbath practices from Genesis 2:3 until the time of Moses. However when Moses begins to speak about keeping the Sabbath he is not making it up from scratch. There is the presupposition that he is reminding the people of a practice they have forgotten rather than one they have never heard of before.

As some have tried to use extra-biblical theories to explain the seven day week concluding with a Sabbath day of rest, Bacchiocchi looks at all the extra-biblical theories of Sabbath origin, and concludes:

We have found that all the conjectures regarding the *time* (Mosaic, settlement, exilic) and the *manner* (astronomical, sociological, magical) complicate rather than clarify the origin of the Sabbath and of the seven-day week.<sup>30</sup>

His hope is that the lack of evidence outside of Scripture will "provoke a fresh appreciation for the Biblical account of the Sabbath origin and meaning."<sup>31</sup>

The fourth item of God's Law handed down through Moses was not put on the list because it was a new idea, but because it was part of God's ideal for humanity that had come to be ignored. It was made law because God created Sabbath in the beginning for the good of humanity and because of the role it played in the relationship between God and God's most cherished creation. The people of Israel needed to be united once again as a community. Part of that formation was to be through their like-minded obedience to the law of God. Part of that law was the keeping of the Sabbath.

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<sup>30</sup> Bacchiocchi, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Bacchiocchi, 32.

## God's Command to Keep Sabbath

Even though the rhythm for Sabbath keeping was instilled in creation at its commencement, it's during the Exodus that we first see the need to apply Sabbath keeping as a rule of life. The enslaved Israelite people had been working without rest for hundreds of years. They then find themselves wandering in the wilderness hungry and worried about where their next meal is coming from. God provides manna from heaven, but along with this provision comes some instruction about the collecting of this free meal: only enough for each day of the week and twice as much when the Sabbath is coming (Ex 16:16-30). Why? Because the work ceases on the Sabbath and God provides for the needs of the bellies of the Israelites by sending food for two days so that they don't have to collect it on the Sabbath day and can rest instead. But some of them, like many of us, had a hard time trusting God's promise for provision and went out on the Sabbath to search for food anyway. This made God angry and frustrated. Here God had given a specific day of rest to a weary people, and they refused to accept the gift. But with the instruction reiterated, and their trust in God to meet their needs becoming repeatedly evident, they got the hang of it and began to stay in on the Sabbath. In *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, Marva J. Dawn addresses this as our need to cease from "trying to be God" as we attempt to always meet our own needs and not acknowledge that God provides.<sup>32</sup>

The rhythm of manna collecting was an introduction to what God made law for the good of His chosen people. When God set about telling the Israelites what it would mean to live in a right relationship with him, He included in his succinct ten rules, a commandment for keeping the Sabbath – for following his example at creation (Ex 20:8-11). In the midst of the instructions comes the reminder of the example He set for them,

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<sup>32</sup> Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 28-29.

"For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day." At creation God set the example for how He intended His creation to live. Now as God makes a covenant with the people of Israel He makes His example the law. God sets Sabbath keeping as a commandment to be kept, but it is also permission to His people to cease from their labors and be refreshed in resting and glorying in all that they have done. But he did put it in the form of a commandment, knowing that it would be something human nature would buck against. Not understanding what is really good for us, most people have a tendency to plow through the gift of the seventh day with heads down. Unobservant of what's going on around us, ignoring the God who gave us our being, forging ahead at full tilt, God's people would tend to treat the seventh day just like any other. God knew what the people needed.

We will now turn our attention to the significant Old Testament references to Sabbath. The text for these references can be found in Appendix B.

### **An Overview of Old Testament Sabbath References**

The word "*Sabbath*" first appears in Scripture in Exodus 16:23 and its final use is in Hebrews 4:9. The Old Testament references to Sabbath pertain to God teaching His people how to behave in a righteous relationship with him. Whereas in the Gospels Jesus is re-teaching the Pharisees how Sabbath should be practiced so that a right relationship is kept between God and the rest of humanity in need, revealing the true spirit of the Sabbath. Following are some of these references and what they bring to bear on the keeping of the Sabbath. They serve to reveal how God's people, the community moved in and out of relationship with God and how often that movement was indicated by whether or not they were keeping or breaking Sabbath.

**Ex 16:23-30** As previously mentioned, God's sending of manna in the desert becomes Moses' first teachable moment on the topic of *Sabbath*. This is the first time the seventh day is given a specific name. Holladay defines it as the act of stopping work or to take a holiday.<sup>33</sup> God helps out the people by closing the storehouse of heaven and not delivering any manna to them on this day. The day is also defined as belonging "to the Lord". This is God's day for God's glory, for God's use, and God had decided at creation that it would be a day used to rest. As exemplified by God at creation and as Moses is instructing the Hebrews, Sabbath means to cease from work. To practice Sabbath means to stop what you are regularly doing.

**Ex 20:8-11 and Deut 5:12-15** In the two accounts of the law of God given to Moses, keeping the Sabbath appears as the fourth commandment to be kept by the people of God. It is included in the great list of ten, which suggests that it is equal in importance and value with the other nine. The Creator of the world has now put this creation ordinance into mandatory law. In the Exodus account the command begins with the word "*zakhor*" which is most often translated "remember". But it carries with it the concept of being mindful as you remember. The idea is not to just think back on a time or experience but rather to carry that time or experience in one's heart so that it becomes part of how one lives. This is how the Sabbath day is to be thought of. In Deuteronomy the word used to call the people to the law is "*shamar*" which means to keep watch or observe. This is not a passive attitude but an active approach to fulfill this command of God.

It is a Sabbath *to* the Lord, a day that belongs to God. Interestingly, the commandment also includes that the people of God *shall* do all their work and everything else they need to do on the other six days. Apparently, to keep Sabbath well, we must have a good work ethic to go along with it. So often today our work time and

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<sup>33</sup> Holladay, 360.

"off" time flow together and it is often unclear if we're resting or working. This is especially difficult for those who claim to relax while they are working hard for others. Part of our good work ethic comes in knowing that there is a quitting time and that it's just as important to honor that moment, as it is to serve our work time with integrity.

Another point that stands out in the Sabbath commandment is its reach of inclusiveness even involving servants, aliens, and animals. In verse 15 of the Deuteronomy account the Israelites are told to remember their time of slavery in which they were never able to rest. In contrast, God rescued them and gives them rest that they are to observe.

**Ex 31:13, Ezek 20:12** Observance of the Sabbath serves as a sign of the covenant between God and His people. It is to be remembered and practiced for generations for the purpose of reminding God's people that God is Lord and it is He who makes them holy. It is necessary for the people of God, to stop what we are doing and realize that all we have accomplished does not make us valuable or holy in God's sight. For that God's people are dependent on God's justification of us. The people of God are called to rest from their labor in order to be reminded of their dependency on God.

**Ex 31:14-15** The Sabbath is observed because it is holy (*qodesh*) to the ones keeping it. It is a holy day, a day set apart, for both parties of the covenant. It is considered so holy that those desecrating the Sabbath by doing work are to be punished by death. The context of this passage is in regard to the building of the tabernacle and the sobering instructions about putting to death those who do not observe the day pertain to thinking that the tabernacle must be built at all cost. In his commentary on this passage, Matthew Henry says:

But they must not think that the nature of the work, and the haste that was required, would justify them in working at it on Sabbath days. The Hebrew word /shabath/ signifies rest, or ceasing from labour. The thing signified by the Sabbath is that rest in glory which remains for the people of God; therefore the

moral obligation of the Sabbath must continue, till time is swallowed up in eternity.<sup>34</sup>

Christians would benefit from this message today. Aside from saving lives, there is really not much validity in the excuses we give for breaking the Sabbath. It would seem that God prefer we cease from labor, rest and enjoy him rather than be caught up in frantic, busy activity "for God" on the Sabbath.

**Lev 23:3** The Sabbath is a day of rest and sacred assembly no matter where the people of God find themselves. This implies that they were not to do what their current culture endorsed but be attentive to what God had commanded them to do and be. There is really no time when it is okay to skip the Sabbath. In this day and age Sabbath keeping will always be counter-culture but apparently it was in the Old Testament as well. We try to offer so many excuses and forget that God – the only one we need to convince – sees through them all, knows what God expects of us and knows that we fall short. Our excuses only work to fool ourselves into believing that we are justified in the anti-Sabbath choices we make.

**Neh 9:13-15** We find the Sabbath mentioned as the prophet Nehemiah is confessing the sins of Israel. It is not particularly singled out but disregarding the Sabbath is listed among the other sins that have kept them from enjoying God's blessings and instead, incurring God's wrath. God really does care about the keeping of the Sabbath among the Israelites. It demonstrates to God the sincerity and intent of God's people to follow God and walk in God's ways.

**Neh 10:31** After Nehemiah and the people confessed their transgressions against God, including malpractice of the Sabbath; they made a new agreement with God. As part of their repentance they agreed that they would not do commerce with those who

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<sup>34</sup> Matthew Henry, "Concise Commentary on Exodus 31", "Matthew Henry Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible", <<http://www.searchgodsword.org/com/mhcccon/view.cgi?book=ex&chapter=031>>.

were buying and selling on the Sabbath. Their "stores" were open on Sunday too, and it took discipline then to refuse to shop and maintain the holiness that the day called for. In the end, Nehemiah had to be forceful with the merchants and threaten them with harm if they did not quit peddling their wares on the Sabbath (Neh 13:15-22). This may well serve as an encouragement and a reminder that those of us who see the problem may be called to speak out about it. The question is, will we be convicted at the depth of Nehemiah and be willing to follow his bold example and speak up? It seems that the Church has come to a place where it chooses to just let it go because it seems too big of a battle to fight. Perhaps Nehemiah often felt the same way.

**Jer 17:19-27** God spoke to Jeremiah and shared some history, instruction and prophecy with him. Reviewing the past God told Jeremiah about the forefathers who had ignored the Sabbath. They were "stiff-necked" and did not respond to God's discipline. It did not go well for them and they bore the consequences of their sin. Jeremiah is instructed to recall the kings and people to obedience to God through the practice of keeping Sabbath. Specifically they are not to carry a load on the Sabbath or bring a load into Jerusalem. Then the prophecy states that if they keep from doing this their own kings will sit on the throne of David and worship of God will happen in the temple and it will be good. The other side of the prophecy is that if they do not keep the Sabbath, God promises destruction to the city. History tells us that the Israelites broke their promise and God kept His.

**Ezek 20:13-26** In this passage God is reflecting on his ever-rebellious people and the way they rejected God in the desert as God led them out of Egypt. Again they desecrated God's Sabbaths, and God had every right to destroy them then and there; but God had mercy on them and let them live. In God's description of their sin, given to Ezekiel, God illuminates the cause of their distraction. They were fixated on their idols. They could not be fully devoted to God because they were drawn to the idols they'd lived



with for so long. God pleaded with them to give up the idols and return to God but they refused and contented themselves with the idols. Are Christians not in the same situation today? We are not so focused on graven images as we are on material wealth, power, reputation and things that will give us the appearance of strength both as individuals and as a nation.

**Ezek 22:23-29** In recounting Jerusalem's sins, God speaks to Ezekiel about the priests who profane God's holy things. The whole nation is included in the terrible acts of profaning what God desires to be holy. They act in ways that remove distinguishing marks from what belongs to God, and what is foul. For them there is no difference between something that honors God and something that honors an idol. They have become ignorant of the difference because their devotion to their God has waned. Ignoring the Sabbath is listed among many other horrible deeds of the priests and people of Israel. It all goes to weaken them as a nation and as the people chosen by God. There is oncoming debate in the Presbyterian Church (USA) about whether Jesus is the only way to God. This is the same blurring of lines that made God so angry at the Israelites. As the church works to be "tolerant" and "diverse", we dishonor God by reducing Him to one god among many. Our lack of Sabbath keeping is just one indicator of our lack of respect for God's authority in our lives and in the world.

These Old Testament scriptures tell us how God intended Sabbath to be kept and the variety of opportunities there are to break Sabbath. The passages provide a good overview of what God intended the Sabbath to do for God's people and for their relationship with God. Now we turn to Jesus and the Sabbath in the New Testament.

## **Jesus and the Sabbath**

Jesus did not set out to teach directly about the Sabbath, but the opportunities arose and required responses from him, so we have his ideas about Sabbath in the Gospels.

**Mt 12:1-8, Mk 2:23-27, Lk 6:1-5** In these passages we have the story of Jesus and his disciples walking through a grain field on the Sabbath. The disciples are hungry; they casually pick some grain to eat for nourishment. The Pharisees catch them and tattle on them to Jesus. They are unsatisfied in the results, since rather than reprimand the disciples, Jesus reminds them of a time when David “illegally” took nourishment from bread that was not his to take. Jesus finishes the story with what almost sounds like a moral at the end of one of Aesop’s Fables as he says, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27-28).

Jesus makes the point here that Sabbath is a gift to serve humanity not the other way around which the Pharisees assume it to be. At creation, God blessed and sanctified the seventh day. God did not demand anything from humanity on that day, God just set it apart and modeled resting in it. It’s easy to get hung up on trying to “get it right” to the point of “not getting it at all”. It seems that’s where the Pharisees were at in regard to Sabbath. For so many years the religious leaders had tried to get right what God meant when he made the Sabbath a commandment at Sinai that there was no longer understanding of the joy and delight of Sabbath keeping. Jesus asserts that He knows what He’s talking about when He states His own Lordship over the day.

**Mt 12:9-14, Mk 3:1-6, Lk 6:6-11** The next pericope tells of Jesus healing a man with a shriveled hand, in the synagogue, on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were watching Jesus to see what he would do. Jesus confronted them with the question about whether it was right to do good or save life on the Sabbath or if it was better to turn the other way and in doing so, do evil or to kill. He acts out in accordance to what is right and true. He

heals the man's hand and the Pharisees plot to kill him. They did not want to have new life breathed into the Sabbath, they just wanted to be rid of Jesus. But Jesus does breathe new life into the understanding of Sabbath. He shows all those gathered there that it is okay to heal, and to bring life to what was dead, to do good. Sabbath time is to be used by man for the glory of God and the restoration of humanity.

**Lk 13:10-17** Jesus heals again on the Sabbath in the synagogue which greatly upsets the synagogue ruler. His attitude toward the Sabbath is in vivid contrast to Jesus'. Here Jesus teaches about a transformed Sabbath by pointing out what is really important. It's not about abstaining from doing good when the opportunity arises. If a need arises on the Sabbath, the people of God are free to respond to it. The response of the official is evidence that those in authority had really lost their way and were leading the people off course. Jesus, in these Sabbath incidences, is just calling people back to the right track. The pericope that follows in the next chapter (Lk 14:1-6) also is an example of Jesus calling people to their senses.

God's design for Sabbath keeping at creation was simple. Once it was made law it became more complicated as it was redefined and quibbled about, most likely as a way for someone to justify pushing its limits and still be okay. It was the legalism of the day that Jesus spoke against in the Gospels, not the observance of the day itself. In transforming the law, Jesus just returned it to it's simplest form. Today's Christians can live with the Ten Commandments in their simplest forms. They do not make us righteous but they do help us live righteous lives.

### **Eschatological Sabbath**

The final topic in this chapter will be based on the passage from Hebrews 4:1-13 which speaks of the Sabbath rest for the people of God. The author of the epistle uses the historical episode of the Israelites wandering in the desert following the exodus to

compare and contrast what all of God's people are facing for eternity. The people of the exodus had been promised a place of peace and rest in Canaan. They would enter into this place of rest at the end of their struggle in the wilderness. The Promised Land would be a reward for their hard labor, first in Egypt and then in the wilderness.

The writer points out to the readers that disobedience in the wilderness prevented some of those wanderers from entering the rest in the Promised Land. He warns that the same would be true for any who did not respond in faith to the gospel. He also states that the rest the Israelites entered into at Canaan was not the end or the only rest God speaks of. God's rescued nation still had work to do in order to live their lives. The Promised Land was a respite from the desert and presented freedoms that were absent in Egypt, but it wasn't the end of their work and labor. The words of Heb 4:9, "There remains a Sabbath-rest for the people of God," tells us that there is a rest beyond the Promised Land which is for a greater number of people, namely those who come to hear the gospel and believe it to be true.

The Hebrews 4 passage speaks of heaven, the heaven in which believers will spend eternity with God. One expression of what this passage tells us it will be like is: "Heaven, then, will be the completion of the Christian's pilgrimage, the end of the struggle against the flesh, the world, and the devil. There will be work to do, but it will not involve fighting against opposing forces."<sup>35</sup> This paints the picture of eternal Sabbath being rest but not idleness, which fits in with the weekly Sabbath rest we have been looking at all along. God set forth a pattern at creation which not only sustains us while we live in this body, but which will be practiced throughout eternity. One of the important reasons that we keep the Sabbath today is that it is preparation for how we will spend eternity. There is importance in Sabbath keeping at every level. Lee draws this conclusion on the various stages of Sabbath rest:

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<sup>35</sup> Erickson, 1230.

Hence it seems that Hebrews 4 implies that the first Adam was to have entered God's rest via the weekly Sabbath; that the Second Adam entered God's rest via the weekly Sabbath; that God's people, the seed of the first and Second Adam, should also enter God's rest via the weekly Sabbath; and hence that the weekly Sabbath is still in force today for the demarcation through time of the journey of the people of God on their way to their (eternal) sabbath rest.<sup>36</sup>

As we practice the eternal rhythm that God set forth in creation, we not only walk in rhythm with God here and now, but we become accustomed to the rhythm of our eternal life where we will live forever in the resting rhythm of God.

Scripture is clear on the role keeping Sabbath plays in the relationship between God and humanity. The day of rest was instituted at creation and the rhythm of work and rest has always been intended to help humanity live in a right relationship with God. It was important enough that when God established the covenant with the people God called God's own at Sinai, that it was made law. The teachers of the law in the New Testament revered it as important as so much attention was spent trying to get the practicing of it right. Jesus does not let it pass when confronted with his own keeping of the Sabbath but breathes new life into a gift from God that has been ruined by too much legalism.

All of Scripture tells the story of God's desire to be in relationship with humanity. God's gift of Sabbath and God's desire that humanity keep the rhythm of work, rest and worship are part of that story. Keeping Sabbath not only puts humanity in rhythm with God but helps to shape who we are as we identify ourselves as belonging to God through our obedience and our coming together as a community to worship God and live out the rhythm of work and rest in our daily lives.

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<sup>36</sup> Lee, 28.

## **The Old Covenant vs. The New Covenant**

One question that arises in the subject of Sabbath keeping is whether or not it is intended for those of us who live in the New Covenant under which our salvation is purchased by Christ rather than by obeying the law. Before that question can be answered one must answer if they believe that the command to keep Sabbath began at Sinai or was it ordained at the time of creation. This will be discussed in the following chapter along with the literature that discusses whether Christians are meant to keep Sabbath on the seventh day, first day, or another day of their choosing.

## CHAPTER THREE

### HISTORICAL ANALYSIS AND LITERARY REVIEW

A plethora of books have been written on the subject of Sabbath. They have been written from every conceivable angle and initiating thought. Some are scholarly and some are more practical. Some are out to prove that keeping Sabbath along with all other elements of the Old Covenant are no longer necessary while others fight for maintaining Sabbath practice. Some argue that Saturday is the only day for contemporary Christians to keep a day holy to the Lord and others state that given our current society, one must grab time to worship and rest when one can. Many books have been written about the proper way to keep Sabbath and those written in the last ten years vary greatly from those written in the Puritan era.

Out of the many books written, five books have been chosen for the purpose of this chapter's literature review and historical analysis. Each book was read with four questions in mind: 1) Should Sabbath be kept today? 2) When should the Sabbath be kept? 3) How should the Sabbath be kept? 4) By whom should the Sabbath be kept? Not every book weighed in heavily on all of the questions but they did all contribute to the ongoing conversation.

One conclusion that has been drawn is that an interested reader could possibly not ever be finished researching, reading, and thinking about this topic of keeping the Sabbath. It seems that interest in the Sabbath will continue to be ongoing until Jesus comes and all of creation realizes its eternal Sabbath rest.

The five books used are diverse in content and intent.<sup>1</sup> *The Ten Commandments* written by Patrick D. Miller is from a Reformed perspective with the intent that it be used

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<sup>1</sup> As has been said there are many excellent books on the topic of Sabbath and as this chapter does not allow for all of them to be referenced, choices had to be made. Some of the criteria that led to these particular works were acceptance among peers, the dates they were written and the appeal they had to the

in teaching. Samuele Bacchiocchi wrote *Divine Rest for Human Restlessness* from a Seventh Day Adventist perspective. Bacchiocchi appears to be the most respected Sabbatarian author by those who hold differing views and his book is also more current than many other works available. D.A. Carson served as editor for the book *From Sabbath To Lord's Day* that invites seven different authors into the biblical, historical and theological investigation of Sabbath. Together they conclude that a strict keeping of the Sabbath today is not something the New Covenant in Christ calls for. *The Rest of God* by Mark Buchanan is an invitation to enter the day sharing practical ways to practice Sabbath and even includes what he calls "Sabbath Liturgies" to help the reader actively engage in Sabbath keeping. The final book used in this discussion has already appeared in other chapters of this writing but one would be remiss not to use it here. Almost every other author writing on the subject has referred to Abraham Joshua Heschel's, *The Sabbath*. Heschel writes from the unique perspective of a Jewish Rabbi who needs to remind even fellow Jews of the importance of observing the day. It is this collection of authors that will guide our thinking and discussion of the five questions presented above.

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author at the time the choice of books was made for this chapter. Some of the other books that were considered were: Paul K. Jewett *The Lord's Day: A Theological Guide to the Christian Day of Worship*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971); Daniel Wilson, *The Divine Authority and Perpetual Obligation of the Lord's Day*, (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1831); Niels-Erik Andreasen *Rest and Redemption*, (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University, 1978); Richard Gavin Calvin *and the Sabbath: The Controversy of Applying the Fourth Commandment*, (Dublin: Mentor, 1997). There were also many more contemporary books on the application of Sabbath: Tilden Edwards *Sabbath Time* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1992); Lynn M. Baab *Sabbath Keeping: Finding Freedom in the Rhythms of Rest*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005); Norman Wirzba *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight (The Christian Practice of Everyday Life)*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006); Wayne Muller *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight In Our Busy Lives*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1999). Marva J. Dawn's *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), is certainly a major work on the subject but is used in the final chapter as a guide for pursuing Sabbath teaching with the congregation so is not included here.



## Should Sabbath be Kept Today?

In seeking to answer this question, several purposes for keeping Sabbath came to the top. One was the impact Sabbath keeping has on one's relationship with God. Another was the influence Sabbath keeping has on issues of social justice. Cultivating a Sabbath attitude impacts all of life and the way we view worship, work and rest. And finally, keeping Sabbath has eternal consequences.

At a young woman's spiritual retreat the question was asked of clergy, "What are we here for? Does God just put us here to be born and die and for God's amusement while we live?" The answer given was that Scripture, from start to finish, talks about God desiring to be in relationship with humanity. Sabbath is one of the gifts God gave humanity so that we might cultivate a right relationship with God. As a commandment it is the bridge between the first commandments that deal with the relationship between God and humanity and the following commandments that deal with human to human relationships:

The first reason for taking the day off—the idiom is self-conscious—is so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you (Dt 5:14b). Everyone needs rest, and the divine command seeks to provide that respite, so that each person may be refreshed, as the Lord was refreshed when resting after the creation. (Ex 31:17)<sup>2</sup>

One way that people of the twenty-first century have denied the relationship we were created to have with God is by believing it is we who make the world go round. We tend to discount any need for God or the gifts God has to offer. We are happy to be self-sufficient. If it weren't for us constantly keeping all the balls in the air, the world would come to a grinding halt. We are convinced that the work we do and the way we do it cannot be done by anyone else. Driven by guilt or an overactive ego, we just won't let it go. But this is sin. It discounts God as the one who made and sustains the universe.

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<sup>2</sup> Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 129.

Miller again points out that the Sabbath helps to keep us in a right relationship with God:

The Sabbath, therefore, is both a safeguard against one of the central ways in which we violate the First Commandment and also a barrier against the constant inclination to justify ourselves and to define ourselves by our work, what we do. The Sabbath cuts human beings loose from their work and calls them to do nothing but give praise to God.<sup>3</sup>

Refusing to keep Sabbath is a refusal to allow God to be on the throne of our hearts.

Because of the Sabbath's unique origin, survival and function, it stands out as a symbol of the covenant between God and humanity.<sup>4</sup>

The relationship a human has with God does not stand on it's own but impacts all of society. It impacts how we live with each other: how we treat one another, think about each other, interact with one another. "What we *are* depends on what *the Sabbath* is to us. The law of the Sabbath day is in the life of the spirit what the law of gravitation is in nature."<sup>5</sup> As we have become conditioned to ignore the Sabbath, we can see what it has done to us as a nation, as the church. We are distanced from one another, from eternity, and distanced from God because we have become distanced from any semblance of a united Sabbath rest.

The Sabbath served to organize a timetable and to insure that the people of God had a schedule of work and rest.<sup>6</sup> It also served to set apart the people of God for God. Stopping to be present to God and absent from work for a period of time serves to refocus ones attention on what is important and Who is in charge of running the planet.

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<sup>3</sup> Miller, 133.

<sup>4</sup> Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Divine Rest For Human Restlessness: A Theological Study Of The Good News Of The Sabbath For Today*, (Rome: The Pontifical Gregorian University Press, 1980), 112.

<sup>5</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 89.

<sup>6</sup> D.A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath To Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1982), 26.

Not only is the Sabbath good for individuals in their relationship with God but also as individuals commit themselves to the day, it impacts all of society. Bacchiocchi points out that the keeping of Sabbath has played a huge role in the survival of both Judaism and Christianity:

Sabbath keeping has contributed to the survival not only of Judaism but of Christianity as well. The essence of a Christian life is a relationship with God. Such a relationship grows and becomes more meaningful, especially through the time and opportunities for worship, service, meditation, and fellowship provided by the Sabbath day. Consequently a proper observance of God's holy day reflects a healthy relationship with God, while disregard for it bespeaks spiritual decline. This was true in ancient Israel; it is also true in modern Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

One of the intents of Sabbath is for the people God created to draw near to God, to spend time in fellowship with God. In missing this opportunity humanity misses the intended fullness of what a relationship with God can be.

This is true of both the worship and rest aspects of Sabbath keeping. Not just our spiritual beings but our physical and emotional beings are in relationship with God and must yield to the time God asks of us so that we can receive the gift of restoration offered in Sabbath. This is one way that the Sabbath marks the people of God.

Bacchiocchi cites that in countries in which only a small percentage of the Christian population worships on a regular basis, other powers dominate. "Secularism, atheism, anticlericalism, immorality, and religious skepticism are rampant."<sup>8</sup> All one needs to do is take notice of the current society we live in. It is easy to see what entities dominate American life. The dollar, politics, athletics, and power are the driving forces while the church, God, and Christian discipleship are disregarded as sweet sources of comfort from the past. While not all social ills can be ascribed to this, it should serve as a grave warning that when the people who claim to be God's family, live in disregard for what God desires for them, it brings a negative consequence.

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<sup>7</sup> Bacchiocchi, 111.

<sup>8</sup> Bacchiocchi, 111.

Even in arguing the point that there is no biblical status for a Sunday tradition of rest and worship, Carson and his colleagues affirm that a weekly day of rest, recreation and worship are key for a functioning society. They acknowledge, "... that societies that have adopted the arrangement of making Sunday a rest day for their members have benefited from this in a variety of ways."<sup>9</sup> One could then argue that it "benefits" society because it is built into every human to rest and worship God. Which works towards supporting Sabbath keeping as Creation Mandate.

Bacchiocchi brings Martin Luther into the conversation. He believes that Luther can be found on each side of the argument as to whether Christians are to keep the Sabbath. On the one hand Luther, by his "reaction against the legalistic and superstitious observance not only of Sunday but of a host of holy days as well"<sup>10</sup> could be perceived to believe that Sabbath keeping was a piece of the Mosaic Law which is not meant to be kept by those living under the new covenant. But on the other hand, as Luther discusses the *Large Catechism* he states that the Sabbath is part of the creation mandate.<sup>11</sup> If this is true about Luther, he would seem to side with Jesus and Paul as a proponent of Sabbath being used as it was intended, not as ceremony but as a true gift of God for the people of God.

God's purpose for creating human beings was so that God could be in relationship with them forever. God did not force humanity to be in an intimate relationship with God but history has proven that inside each of us is a desire to know and be known by something greater than ourselves. That is a desire God placed in the souls of humans at creation. That internal yearning for God includes a yearning for rest,

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<sup>9</sup> Carson, 403. Their argument is that there is not strong biblical or theological evidence to support the ongoing keeping of Sabbath for today.

<sup>10</sup> Bacchiocchi, 46.

<sup>11</sup> Bacchiocchi, 47.

for Sabbath, as a response to the instruction given in Psalm 46:10 "Be still and know that I am God." Mark Buchanan puts it this way:

Sabbath is the stranger you've always known. It's the place of homecoming you've rarely or never visited, but which you've been missing forever. You recognize it the moment you set eyes on it. It's the gift that surprises you, not by its novelty, but by its familiarity. It's the song you never sang but, hearing it now, know inside out, its words and melody, its harmonies, its rhythm, the way the tune quickens just before the chorus bursts. It's been asleep in you all this time, waiting for the right kiss to wake it.<sup>12</sup>

It is in all of humanity, this desire for rest, this desire to know God, this yearning to be still. Therefore it must be concluded that all who seek God yearn to keep Sabbath. It is a part of the human package that is and forever shall be. Sabbath is a gift meant to be continually opened by those it's been given too. It is an essential part of humans being in relationship with God. But those whom God has called as God's own should be able to yield to that yearning more easily than those who are not actively seeking to grow in their relationship with God. This, however is not always the case.

Interestingly, as the keeping of Sabbath helps to keep one in relationship with God, the practice also bears on the relationships we have with others. This point seemed to bubble up out of the readings: Sabbath keeping is a justice issue. Every creature, every field needs a time of rest. It is the responsibility of those in charge of the well being of others to secure for them a Sabbath rest. When they fail to do so they are committing sin against God and their fellow created beings, be they beast or human.

In Exodus when Moses and Aaron asked Pharaoh to let the people have time to go and worship God, Pharaoh ignored their plea and added more labor to their backs. "The service of God is rejected in behalf of a secular exploitation of human life and human work. That is what triggered the Lord's gift of the Sabbath. What is required is what is needed to make and to keep human life human—and not inhumane, as it was in

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul By Restoring Sabbath*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 104.

Egypt.”<sup>13</sup> Although the keeping of a Sabbath rest was part of the creation mandate, God made it law for the Israelites when they had been rescued from Pharaoh. But the law was a gift to them, a blessing, an order to stop and to rest; something they had not been allowed to do in Egypt. The commandment brought justice to those who had once been slaves.

When this commandment is stated in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 with the injunction to remember Egypt, it meant to remember that they were deep under slavery, they were forced to work without rest. In contrast, what they are called into through obedience to God, is rest. In this the commandment is not a burden, it is a gift to be received, to be able to put away the work and fully embrace the day of worship and rest. Justice is executed when Sabbath is practiced. God’s best intention for humanity is that his people experience the grace of rest and worship one day out of seven. It is good and right and honoring to God and one another.

Each individual is responsible to respond to the Sabbath they are called to observe but there is a great responsibility upon those who control the schedules of others. It is incumbent on those who are responsible for work schedules to provide Sabbath rest for their employees and even animals that work for them. To keep people working around the clock is sin. When those who are in power to make things stop, don’t, they are placing the burden on those employees who have no choice. This is Egypt all over again even though there is pay as reimbursement for labor and people choose to work or not, God’s command is that there be time for the workers to rest. Like Pharaoh, most factories and corporations have no regard for God and it matters not to them that their employees do not receive regular time to worship, rest, or commune with their families.

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<sup>13</sup> Miller, 130.

"The primary trajectory set loose in and by the Sabbath Commandment is the principle of regular release from the things that enslave, oppress, and bind human life."<sup>14</sup> When God's people refuse Sabbath rest, they are choosing to be enslaved, oppressed, and bound. What goes unnoticed is that when an individual chooses not to take a Sabbath rest they are choosing for those within their circle of influence as well. Running the red light of Sabbath impacts not only the person choosing to break Sabbath but others in their family, their working world, and their community.

Coaches of sports teams trying to find a convenient time when the field is free or there's "nothing else going on" will more and more turn to Sunday as a practice time. While it is easy to blame employers and coaches of exacting this injustice upon society, it can't stop there. A church can be guilty of encouraging people to run the red light as well. A full Sunday calendar may draw people to worship, but all the activity surrounding it may or may not be conducive to rest or a true focus on God. Churches can be so demanding on family members that busyness becomes the rule of Sunday rather than rest.

Although D.A. Carson's group of writers believes that the law given at Sinai is not directly applicable under the new covenant, they allow that the commandments do still have value:

The commands to Israel about the Sabbath, though no longer binding, remain instructive about God's concern for His people's physical rest. If God commanded His people to rest every seven days back in the Old Testament and it was considered valuable, is it not likely that such regular rest will be just as valuable today?<sup>15</sup>

As the commandment stood in the Old Testament (especially Deut 5:14) it served as an equalizer among all classes and all peoples. When the seventh day came, *everyone* was to stop his or her working and rest. It was very humanitarian and carries with it

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<sup>14</sup> Miller, 133.

<sup>15</sup> Carson, 403.

today the instruction to love one's neighbor as one loves one's self. It could be argued again that it is a valuable practice because it is part of who humanity is created to be.

Sabbath keeping is sensible. It is practical. It is good for the one keeping it and for their neighbor, employees, and family. As Miller points out:

Keeping the Sabbath seems like an easy, even pleasurable thing to do, and there are countless witnesses to the joy of the Sabbath rest. Even so, other impulses work against acceptance of the gift of the Sabbath. These impulses are evident in the voices of the prophets (e.g., Jeremiah) and leaders (e.g., Nehemiah) and ring across the ages as evidence that the Sabbath Commandment is one of the most difficult to keep. Its promise, inherent and not explicit, is constantly undercut by the power of economic and personal desire.<sup>16</sup>

It is a result of sin that this injustice is practiced. Greed is often at the root of putting in more hours at work, more practice as a team, more chores around the house. Greed leads to robbing self and others of the gift God gave to all of humanity to rest and worship. God has called God's chosen people to keep Sabbath in order to practice justice in their families and societies.

A third reason that the people of God need to keep Sabbath is because it prepares them for eternity. Many Christians choose to live today as the Israelites did in Egypt, bound to their taskmasters. Today's Christians think they are choosing freely what they will and won't do, but in reality they have made themselves subject to the very things that are meant to serve them, and end up serving the creation rather than the Creator. It has much to do with the misguided concept that "this is all there is". Today's society – Christian and non-Christian – tend to ignore the concept of eternity. Therefore the majority of humans live for today, the here and now, this moment, and neglect the things that will never fade away. Forgetting that if one is in Christ, they are made for eternity has led Christians to neglect those things that prepare them for eternity with God.

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<sup>16</sup> Miller, 154.



As our world becomes more and more consumed with production and the lifestyle that is required to maintain that productivity, people are buying into the myth that their work is what defines them and gives them worth:

Men and women are insisting that it is really only their work that is fulfilling and gradually it absorbs them to such an extent that they feel guilty about doing anything else. This is a particular danger for those whose work is their vocation and for Christians who rationalize their addiction as 'serving God.'<sup>17</sup>

If a person believes that their vocation defines them they will serve that vocation with all that they are or risk becoming irrelevant. Reforming minds so that persons believe the truth, that it is their Creator who defines them, is essential. Sabbath plays a role in that mind change.

Heschel quotes Rabbi Solomon of Karlin:

Unless one learns how to relish the taste of Sabbath while still in this world, unless one is initiated in the appreciation of eternal life, one will be unable to enjoy the taste of eternity in the world to come. Sad is the lot of him who arrives inexperienced and when led to heaven has no power to perceive the beauty of the Sabbath. . . .<sup>18</sup>

This can be said not only of Sabbath rest but of Sabbath worship as well. Since many of our clues about eternity include worship it leads one to ask why someone who is opposed to worship would want to spend eternity in the presence of God, forever involved in that activity. This can also be asked of those of us who refuse to embrace Sabbath rest. Why would we look forward to an eternity of Sabbath rest when we are so opposed to taking that rest here on earth? Being earthly minded we fail to cultivate an eternal desire.

Sabbath serves to help us be mindful of eternity. All week we are attached to this world through things and space and time. The Sabbath is the gift of time to be detached from all of that and to turn our hearts and minds to things we cannot see.

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<sup>17</sup> Carson, 404.

<sup>18</sup> Heschel, 74.

“Things are our tools; eternity, the Sabbath, is our mate. Israel is engaged to eternity. Even if they dedicate six days of the week to worldly pursuits, their soul is claimed by the seventh day.”<sup>19</sup> As a culture we have forgotten about eternity, but Heschel reminds us that eternity is where our hearts are bound, inextricably bound. Sabbath should remind us of that but our minds are grounded in the here and now. One reason that we have no concept of eternity is because we have no concept of Sabbath.

On a gravestone in Camptown, PA, these words are inscribed above the name of the one buried there, “All the work is done.” The gentleman buried there cannot do one more thing to impact this world’s realm. He has surrendered all the works of his hands to God. Sabbath, as preparation for eternity calls us to live one day in seven as if all the work is done. Christians would do well to observe that practice as long as we live on this side of eternity as it seems we will be better fit for heaven if we can rest and worship well here.

### **When Should the Sabbath be Kept?**

The debate on when to keep Sabbath has been ongoing perhaps since the first Christians began to meet for worship on the first day of the week. In Carson’s book there is an excellent timeline of the Sabbath to Sunday evolution. Bacchiocchi still holds that the Sabbath is meant to be kept on the Seventh Day only, other authors talk more of a “sabbatical principle” and “sabbath attitude” that give more flexibility to the keeping of one day in seven holy to the Lord. A conclusion on when to keep Sabbath is difficult to draw but the history of its keeping gives the modern day Christian clues into when it is good and right to worship God and rest in God.

In the Old Testament, Sabbath was understood to be a day of rest and worship. Ceasing from daily labor lent free time to the day for focusing on God. This was missing

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<sup>19</sup> Heschel, 48.

in Egypt as the Israelites slaved without rest and without opportunity to worship God. As Jews were converted to Christianity, they continued to attend Synagogue and hear the teachings they had grown up with and which pointed to the Messiah they now believed had come in Jesus Christ.

Acts 13:27 and 15:21 tell us that the law continued to be read in the synagogue. If Paul was there and people were coming to faith in Christ and returning to hear more, then one can assume that there was a Christian presence in the synagogue on the Sabbath.<sup>20</sup> But as animosity grew between Christians and Jews, the Jewish Christians were not as welcome in the Synagogue. They needed to meet separately to speak specifically about Jesus and to share communion.

As their hearts were transformed by Jesus Christ so was the way they were able to practice their faith. New belief required new practice. The resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week lent itself to a new day of celebration for the Christian. Acts 20:7-12 is a text that argues for the new Christians meeting on the "first day of the week" (v.7). Bacchiocchi would disagree and brush off the reference as irrelevant but a writer in Carson's book, M. Max B. Turner says:

We are faced with the conclusion that Luke's specification of the day of the week in Acts 20:7 probably should not be relegated to the category of irrelevant personal reminiscence. It represents a stage in the growing consciousness of, and ecclesiastical importance of, the "first day of the week". The brevity of Luke's notice would suggest that he considered such meetings to be uncontroversial and to require no further explanation, from which we may infer that they were relatively widespread and regular.<sup>21</sup>

Because there is no reference to the day of this gathering being called the "Lord's Day" one cannot assume this was the institution of such a habit for Christians in general. But because Luke does not explain the gathering any further, he is assuming that his

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<sup>20</sup> Carson, 124.

<sup>21</sup> Carson, 132.

readers understand that this is a regular practice.<sup>22</sup> The evidence is inconclusive but the clues might lead one to believe that the Early Church was accustomed to gathering for worship on the first day of the week.

We know that Sunday worship became common practice for Christians:

It is impossible to be dogmatic as to the time of the origin of Sunday worship, but we have found reasons for thinking it probably began in the early Palestinian church. The primary *reason* for its origin must be the Christian need for a time of distinctively Christian worship. This need for *some* regular time of worship must be clearly distinguished from possible reasons for the choice of *Sunday* rather than another day. The choice of a day *of the week* is entirely natural in a Jewish context and anything less frequent would surely not have met the need. Thus it is beside the point to ask why early Christians should have chosen to commemorate the Resurrection weekly rather than monthly or annually. It was the need for a regular and frequent time of Christian worship that led to the choice of a day *of the week*. Commemorating the Resurrection, if it was a motive, would be the reason for choosing *Sunday* rather than another day.<sup>23</sup>

While it is impossible to pinpoint the origin of the Lord's Day, the choosing of Sunday for worship, for commemorating the resurrection, for gathering Christians together for fellowship, makes sense. There is no evidence that the Lord's Day was to take the place of Sabbath, it was not a day of rest nor was it related to the fourth commandment. "It was simply, by the normative custom of the apostolic church, the day on which Christians met to worship, and, for us, the use of its title, the Lord's Day, in Rev 1:10 gives that custom the stamp of canonical authority."<sup>24</sup>

It was in the second through fourth centuries that the idea of Sunday as a day of rest developed. There was no universal practice among Christians, as how one practiced one's faith depended largely on the traditions one had grown up with. Some

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<sup>22</sup> Carson, 133.

<sup>23</sup> Carson, 238. This point is well made by P. Cotton, *From Sabbath to Sunday*, (Bethlehem, Pa.: published by the author, 1933), 79.

<sup>24</sup> Carson, 240.

Christians had judaizing tendencies and the Council of Laodicea (A.D. 380) legislated against a series of judaizing practices which included requiring resting on the Sabbath.<sup>25</sup>

In the fourth century when Constantine wrote into law that all work would cease on Sunday, it was the most distinct initial call for a work-free Sunday that we have in history.<sup>26</sup> Bacchiocchi sees this as a negative imposition. People were forced by government to make Sunday a day of rest. At this time the church leaders appealed to the Sabbath commandment, interpreting it so that it fit in with the imperial legislation set by Constantine.<sup>27</sup> In the end, the legislation of Sunday as a day of rest and worship had as its intent a practical rather than theological purpose. Bacchiocchi and the writers in Carson's book agree that the imposition of Sunday on the people of the day had nothing to do with theology. Carson supports this thought:

Following Constantine's laws of A.D. 321, regard for Sunday as a day of rest increased for a number of reasons. Sunday rest was first valued as providing leisure for worship; when the imperial legislation guaranteed such leisure, church services grew in length and a tendency to stress the morally obligatory nature of attendance at Sunday worship slowly became apparent. Idle Christians had to be occupied, and the Constantinian church of the Empire became aware of its responsibility to educate the newly Christianized masses. Sunday rest was also promoted by analogy with the Old Testament Sabbath long before a specific application of the Sabbath commandment became theologically acceptable, and the example of pagan Roman festival was probably also operative. These reasons, it should be noticed, were popular and practical rather than theological.<sup>28</sup>

By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, there was still no universal understanding of what to do with the Sabbath. Sunday had taken a major role but there was much confusion about what to do with that former day of rest, the Sabbath, in order to reconcile it with this new day of resurrection commemoration as well as service to God and worship.

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<sup>25</sup> Carson, 261.

<sup>26</sup> Carson, 280.

<sup>27</sup> Bacchiocchi, 45.

<sup>28</sup> Carson, 302. M. Herron, "Sunday and Holyday Observance", *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967), 13:800.

In the Middle Ages the church lived under ecclesiastical authority and the law of the Old Covenant:

The medieval church pursued the *analogy* with the people of the Old Covenant a long way, in its conception, for example, of Christendom as a theocratic society bearing comparison with Old Testament Israel or in its understanding of the Christian ministry as a sacrificing priesthood to which many of the rules about the levitical priesthood might be applied, but it did not lose sight of the fact that the authority of the Mosaic law as such had been abrogated. The moral law contained in the Mosaic corpus was still binding because moral law is unchanging, and the Sabbath commandment was indeed directly applicable to Christians by virtue of this inclusion in the Decalogue, the summary of the moral law. In this respect, however, its application concerned sanctification and hope, not Lord's Day observance.<sup>29</sup>

It seems that this is how the majority of Christians subconsciously view the Sabbath and themselves, today. This Medieval understanding of what it means to be the people of God is still strongly held by many. How this understanding is lived out has been part of the controversy on when to keep Sabbath as well as how to be the Body of Christ in every particular age. There is struggle to think of Sabbath keeping as a means of grace rather than a legalistic practice that makes one right with God if kept.

As Medieval theology developed, this position on the moral law was transformed. The distinction between moral and ceremonial aspects of the Sabbath arose. This made it possible to apply the Sabbath to Christians literally rather than spiritually but without imposing the seventh day observance, which was seen as judaizing.<sup>30</sup>

The process of Sabbath keeping for Christians has a long history of ebb and flow, come and go. The constant pull between wanting to identify with the people of the law and pushing away from that identity as people not of the law but of the covenant of grace through Christ, has kept the church seeking and arguing. This could again affirm that within us all is that pull of the creation ordinance for Sabbath time.

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<sup>29</sup> Carson, 305.

<sup>30</sup> Carson, 305.

The coming of the Protestant Reformation overturned the accepted Sabbatarian views and practices of the Middle Ages. The reformers returned to a position closer to that of the early church Fathers. Luther did not believe that Christians were bound to keep Sabbath "as a matter of religious obligation"<sup>31</sup> but felt that in regard to the human need for bodily rest that Sabbath served a purpose. "Luther regarded this requirement of rest as the natural law content of the Sabbath commandment, which remains when the Mosaic ceremonial aspect is removed."<sup>32</sup> Luther understood that it was the church and not God who ordained a specific day with specific instructions on how to spend the day. He did affirm that in doing this, it supported the justice issue of Sabbath by giving those without power to choose to rest a forced rest. This sounds like what God intended when the law was first instituted in the Old Testament with the responsibility of the landowners to give all of their servants a rest on the seventh day.

Calvin emphasized the ceremonial aspect of the fourth commandment. He saw in it the opportunity and responsibility for the Christian to practice mortification, purifying oneself for the coming kingdom of God. He agreed with Luther that Sunday as the day of worship was merely a convenience and not something that Christians needed to be bound to in order to be obedient to God. But in his commentary on Genesis, Calvin supports the theory that Sabbath rest is part of the creation mandate, teaching that a Command to rest one day in seven, in order to be free for worship, dates from the time of creation."<sup>33</sup>

The struggle for understanding continued and within the rapidly developing Protestant tradition a new Sabbatarianism emerged. It was especially affirmed in English Puritanism and was characteristic of English, Scottish and American

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<sup>31</sup> Carson, 314.

<sup>32</sup> Carson, 314.

<sup>33</sup> Carson, 335.

Protestantism.<sup>34</sup> This resulted in actually a stricter Sabbatarian doctrine leading to seventh-day Sabbatarianism. Imprecise ideas of Sunday observance during the mid-sixteenth century reveals that the angst some folks have over getting Sabbath “right” has been an ongoing challenge over many years. The struggle to find that rhythm of stopping and starting is not a new quest, but one that has been an ongoing part of the Christian church.

In the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a wide acceptance of Sunday being a day of rest for all. The understanding was that it was good for the souls of all people to have a day of rest and there was not a lot of contradiction from any sector during this time. This is not to say that the Sunday Sabbath went un-contested. The English High Church Anglican tradition held a non-Sabbatarian view. William Paley (1785) was another non-Sabbatarian, joined by John Milton, Quaker Robert Barclay, James Baldwin Brown of the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup>

The “Sabbatarian view” meant that one held that one specific day in seven should be set apart for worship and rest. Sunday had not become the undisputed day. Our attention will now turn to that dispute.

The historical evidence points to the fact that while there is good reason to take time to rest and worship on the day of the resurrection (Sunday), it was not a natural occurrence but a decision that was made as Christianity developed. Two primary reasons Sunday was chosen was for convenience and for getting away from Saturday to move away from any identifying with Judaism. As Bacchiocchi and Carson have both pointed out, it was a day imposed on the church by the government and generations have inherited that practice.

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<sup>34</sup> Carson, 312.

<sup>35</sup> Carson, 330-331.



Miller points out that the quest is to understand how the theological connections are made between the fourth commandment, Sabbath and Sunday so that the church finds fulfillment of the Sabbath Commandment in its Sunday practices.<sup>36</sup> Sunday is a natural choice in that it celebrates the redemptive work of God as it was begun in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and completed in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, providing redemption to all people.

Miller explains:

The holiness of the day is given a new substance but one consistent with its meaning from the beginning. It is the time in which the community gathers to remember the redemptive work of God, which is exactly how Deuteronomy understands the Sabbath Commandment. It is impossible for Christians to keep the Sabbath under the motivations provided by the Deuteronomic form of the commandment and not celebrate the first day of the week. That is the day of remembering what God has done for us, both when we were in slavery in Egypt and in our slavery to sin and guilt. Remembering is what the Sabbath-Sunday is all about. 'Remember how the Lord your God brought you out with a mighty hand.' 'This do in remembrance of me.' So the church's celebration of the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, is not a rejection of the Sabbath. It is a carryover of the Sabbath, precisely to ensure its observance.<sup>37</sup>

For Miller it makes perfect sense that Christians today worship on Sunday. It is a logical transition. With the focus being to remember what God has done through Jesus Christ as the Israelites remembered what God had done through the Exodus, it is hard to argue against this way of thinking.

But Bacchiocchi sees the Sabbath-Sunday as a "compromise position" that the Reformed tradition has adopted. It acknowledges Sabbath as a creation mandate but also defends Sunday as a legitimate substitution for the Sabbath.<sup>38</sup>

Still, Bacchiocchi is not particularly open to Sunday as a valid day to practice Sabbath.

He argues that Sunday rest and worship are dying, which is a very valid point. He

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<sup>36</sup> Miller, 163.

<sup>37</sup> Miller, 164.

<sup>38</sup> Bacchiocchi, 53.

suggests the reason is that there is no Biblical or apostolic mandate for Sunday-keeping. He questions how a Christian can take "Sunday-keeping seriously when he is told that the day is merely a convenient time for worship chosen by the church and that in principle he is free from the observance of any special day."<sup>39</sup> He advises that a rediscovery and acceptance of the Biblical seventh-day keeping of Sabbath would compel people with a theological conviction to recommit themselves to a Sabbath rest, worship and recreation to God.<sup>40</sup> His theory is wise but could be broadened to include those Christians that accept a Sunday Sabbath.

Carson is correct in that, "There is no hint anywhere in the ministry of Jesus that the first day of the week is to take on the character of the Sabbath and replace it."<sup>41</sup> He and Bacchiocchi have shown that Sunday-Sabbath has evolved as a preference of those in authority as far back as Constantine and Reformed churches have not argued themselves away from what has "always been".

If moving from Saturday to Sunday was primarily a move away from identifying with the Jews and a desire to identify with the resurrection because that was what was needed at the time, perhaps it is time again to look at what is needed for this generation to reintroduce them to an awareness of their need for a time to rest, worship and recreate. This is where we will turn our attention to Sabbath principle or attitude.

Miller points out that keeping the Sabbath is not just about a day in the week but a principle that is found throughout the Torah. In the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 23:10-11), the sabbatical principle is encountered in the way the Israelites are told to treat their land. Six years of work and employment of the workers and one year of letting the land lie fallow and release for those who have worked the land. This is good not only

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<sup>39</sup> Bacchiocchi, 179.

<sup>40</sup> Bacchiocchi, 179.

<sup>41</sup> Carson, 85.

for the land but also for the slaves and for the poor who are allowed to gather up what the land volunteers during its year of rest.<sup>42</sup>

The sabbatical principle appears again in The Holiness Code (Leviticus 25:1-7). Again it speaks to a seventh year rest for the land but it is stressed that this is to be a complete Sabbath rest for the land and done for the Lord.<sup>43</sup> This was their instruction as they began a new life in the Promised Land and is a definite echo of the cultural mandate. The sabbatical principle appears again in The Deuteronomic Code as it commands that there shall be a release of bonded servants every seventh year (Deut 15:1-11). Here too, it is a release "to the Lord".<sup>44</sup> And finally the sabbatical principle appears in The Jubilee Year (Lev 25). Obedience to this Sabbath principle involves rest for the land, redemption of property for all, and redemption of hired or bound laborers. It is a grander version of what is to happen on the day of the weekly Sabbath.

Miller also points out that the various festivals and offerings found in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, are infused with the Sabbath keeping principle. They are times and seasons set apart for the people of God to worship, cease from their labors and focus on God.<sup>45</sup> This all goes to the point that keeping the Sabbath goes beyond one day of the week made holy to God. The Sabbath principle is an attitude that pervades all of life. It not only has to do with setting ourselves apart for God but also with the care of the earth and one another. It speaks to a rhythm God intends to have at work in the world and in our lives.

Sabbath keeping is about interrupting one's life to make focused time for God in a way that is different from the rest of the week. Bacchiocchi adds that when the attempt

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<sup>42</sup> Miller, 135.

<sup>43</sup> Miller, 136.

<sup>44</sup> Miller, 137.

<sup>45</sup> Miller, 150.

is made to regulate the Sabbath it leads to a legalistic observance of the day, which can destroy its spirit of freedom and joy. He feels that Scripture should be used to identify particular principles that pertain to the keeping of Sabbath rather than to set specific activities that will and will not be acceptable to the day.<sup>46</sup> Keeping Sabbath requires adopting an attitude more than it depends on following a list of do's and don'ts.

As Buchanan introduces the subject of a Sabbath attitude he clarifies that in using the word he means two things. The first is that of the specific twenty-four hour period in which the Sabbath is to be kept and the second is to describe the attitude of the heart that must accompany the day. This attitude cultivates attentiveness toward God. Both are required to properly observe "The Sabbath".<sup>47</sup>

Sabbath is as much attitude as it is practice. Buchanan writes, "The Exodus command, with its call to imitation, plays on a hidden irony: we mimic God in order to remember we're not God. In fact, that is a good definition of Sabbath: *imitating God so that we stop trying to be God.*"<sup>48</sup> The more we ignore Sabbath the more we ignore the truth about who God is and who we are as God's created beings. The truth is that most of us are blind to the struggle. Upset about how busy and tired we are we continue to muddle through unaware that there is a cure for our madness. God gave Sabbath as a tool for us to be able to keep things in perspective. To actively practice trust in the Creator of the universe, to humble ourselves to God's authority, to understand that what we do can be dispensed with for a time.

Heschel adds this to the discussion of the proper attitude in the practice of Sabbath:

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<sup>46</sup> Bacchiocchi, 181.

<sup>47</sup> Buchanan, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Buchanan, 87.

What is Sabbath? *Spirit in the form of time*. With our bodies we belong to space; our spirit, our souls, soar to eternity, aspire to the holy. The Sabbath is an ascent to the summit. It gives us the opportunity to sanctify time, to raise the good to the level of the holy, to behold the holy by abstaining from profanity.<sup>49</sup>

In American Christian culture, this may not happen for many on a fixed day of the week.

But when one has the opportunity to “sanctify time” this is the attitude that goes with it.

“Time to us is a measuring device rather than a realm in which we abide.”<sup>50</sup>

Americans today identify who they are by the things they own, the things they have accomplished in the past, and the things they are striving to accomplish in the future.

But they tend to dismiss the present moment, which is where they live, and the moment in which God meets them. Without a Sabbath attitude, when the “time” for Sabbath is upon us, we can miss the gift of the day completely. Mindfulness is required whether one keeps Sabbath on Saturday, Sunday, or any other day of the week.

After reviewing the history of Sabbath throughout time one can see that there has not been agreement about the day since Christianity began. It is true that there is no biblical evidence that Sunday became the new Sabbath. It is true that the emergence of Sunday as a day of rest and worship came about more for convenience and the pleasure of the government. But this does not dilute the importance of taking time for Sabbath rest and worship. The need for rest and worship is still in each human. Perhaps God worked through Constantine to give the Christian church what it needed but could not accomplish on it's own – a central, one day in seven, to cease their labor and rest in God.

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<sup>49</sup> Heschel, 75.

<sup>50</sup> Heschel, 96.

## How Should the Sabbath be Kept?

Buchanan points out that very few rules are written about keeping Sabbath in the Old Testament. There are many rules written about a great many other things in the Pentateuch, but not much about Sabbath, "only the repetition of general guidelines: rest, cease from work, celebrate, remember, observe, deny yourself, delight yourself."<sup>51</sup> But in the attempt to get a handle on what it means to keep Sabbath, everyone from ancient rabbis to Puritans to contemporary Christians have tried to define precisely how to keep the day. Buchanan suggests that if contemporary Christians would treat the day as art rather than science, they would be much happier with the finished project.

While defending those rabbis who created so many rules to keep the Sabbath holy, Heschel argues that their intentions were good. But as they worked to enlarge the system of laws and rules to help observe the Sabbath they created a system that was beyond the reach of ordinary humans.<sup>52</sup> There is a continued need to find the balance between the holiness of the day and the rest of the day, between structure and freedom. "It must always be remembered that the Sabbath is not an occasion for diversion or frivolity; not a day to shoot fireworks or to turn somersaults, but an opportunity to mend our tattered lives; to collect rather than to dissipate time."<sup>53</sup> Heschel believed that the rules kept the day from getting out of hand, kept a sense of reverence for the day. The rules do have a place. They serve to keep us in check. It is when the rules are exalted, as apparent in Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees, that they work contrary to the spirit of keeping the Sabbath.

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<sup>51</sup> Buchanan, 111.

<sup>52</sup> Heschel, 17.

<sup>53</sup> Heschel, 17-18.

Carson's book talks about the gift God intended in giving Sabbath and how the gift was abused and misconstrued over time:

The giving of the Sabbath law was not meant to be a burden; in fact the Sabbath was to reflect God's compassion for His people, as well as to emphasize the character of His holiness. But this intention was forgotten in arrogance and rebellion as legalism and traditionalism grew. The true concept of the Sabbath law was proclaimed again and again by God's prophets who stressed the covenant relationship, but people were unwilling to listen. Instead of understanding it to be their privilege to rest on the Sabbath, they viewed it as deprivation; instead of recognizing their opportunity to commune with God, they saw only inconvenience and hardship. Rather than discovering freedom to worship, they felt in bondage to a law, and instead of grasping the idea of renewal of their covenant relationship to God, they experienced the tragedy of legalism.<sup>54</sup>

God intended a gift to meet deep basic human needs and to remind humanity of the covenant that exists between creation and Creator. God continues to extend that invitation and humanity continues to say "no thank you." People on the fringe of the church today resent being told that they need to take their weekend and spend a portion of it in worship of God. They do not see this as invitation but as a legalistic demand on their time, which they are not willing to give.

In general, the human race lives unaware that God made them to be in relationship with God. Many of this generation's American Christians live as if they are unaware as well and often fail to see that the invitation to Sabbath serves a purpose of calling them out from the world to experience life with God as God intended. Whether one experiences that invitation as an inherent yearning or knows what Scripture says about the subject the invitation often goes unheeded. Miller joins in on this part of the conversation.

The Sabbath is given and commanded not only to provide a time for rest but also time that is 'for the Lord.' There is a quality and sacredness to this time that moves it beyond simply the cessation of labor which is its fundamental intent. That is why the Sabbath became one of the signs of the people of God.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Carson, 34-35.

<sup>55</sup> Miller, 131.

When Christians practice Sabbath they show themselves to be separate from the world. It is an awkward practice in today's society. It takes a lot of nerve and determination to stand against the flow of the tide and stop right in the middle of it. When everyone else is ignoring the red light, one can feel kind of like a moron, sitting still while others pull around the stopped object so that they can keep going. Those others may not like the guilt someone who is stopped is producing in them, as they know they should stop at the red light but won't.

Many people, Christian and non, view the weekend as a holiday. As they approach the end of the workweek they focus on how they will stay busy until they have to return to the routine of work. In order to experience the Sabbath, Bacchiocchi discerns that two things must be overcome, one being the worship of work and the other being the worship of leisure. Both stand in the way of practicing Sabbath as God intends. God wants humanity to recognize and accept God's dominion over their lives and their time.<sup>56</sup> Keeping Sabbath in a manner that pleases God requires more than relinquishing one hour in a week so that "dues are paid", and one can return to the grind of work with an eased conscience. God requires that the day be consecrated for him when the attitude is adopted that it's okay to stop and the choice is made to "Rest as if all your work is done."<sup>57</sup>

Bacchiocchi also calls for people to turn away from the worship of leisure:

Believing that leisure, entertainment or even physical rest per se are adequate to restore weary bodies, many seek and pay only for the rest provided by the sanctuaries of our materialistic society: the football field, the amusement park, the beach, the dance-hall, the restaurant, the ski-resort, the national park, et cetera. Such leisure or entertainment places and activities by themselves, however, provide at best a form of evasion, a temporary oblivion of oneself, but

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<sup>56</sup> Bacchiocchi, 175.

<sup>57</sup> Bacchiocchi, 68.



leave an internal spiritual emptiness which is at the root of much exhaustion and tension.<sup>58</sup>

This attitude is evidenced by the numerous times you can hear folks returning from vacations saying "I need a vacation to recover from vacation". It is the same when we don't stop and rest weekly, allowing God to restore our bodies and souls. With the demands that are on families today with school activities it becomes increasingly difficult to take the time. Our foot keeps slipping off the brake, hesitant to make the commitment or just feeling the need to keep up with everyone else.

While Heschel states that the Sabbath is not solely dedicated to spiritual goals and that recreation is a piece of observing the day, seeking physical comfort and pleasure,<sup>59</sup> he also speaks to the balance between body tending and soul tending. He states, "... on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to Someone Else."<sup>60</sup> Being mindful of this should dictate how we spend our days and especially how we spend our Sabbath.

For Philo of Alexandria, a First Century Hellenistic Jewish philosopher and Christian, the Sabbath was to be spent in the contemplation of wisdom. He was called lazy as he fought against the seven-day work week.<sup>61</sup> Humanity has been married to busyness for a very long time. As the early Church Father, historian and exegete, Eusebius, developed a Sabbath practice, he thought about the priesthood of all believers and their duty to serve God. A day free from work would avail them the opportunity to live out their duty to God.<sup>62</sup> The Puritans held that the Christian Sabbath was rest *for* worship, which led to a very legalistic view of the day and is still etched in many

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<sup>58</sup> Bacchiocchi, 177.

<sup>59</sup> Heschel, 19

<sup>60</sup> Heschel, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Carson, 51.

<sup>62</sup> Carson, 285.

memories today. The writers of The Westminster Assembly's Directory for Public Worship had very specific rules for how to practice the Sabbath day.<sup>63</sup>

Christians throughout time by decree and by council have set out to define how the Sabbath should be kept. But beyond the tangible rules, what may be most helpful is to develop the attitude required to practice Sabbath and to internalize the practice rather than leave it as something one "puts on" one day a week. Buchanan and Heschel speak well to this topic.

According to Heschel we keep Sabbath by celebrating time rather than space as "we try to become attuned to *holiness in time*."<sup>64</sup> Heschel talks about sacred *time* and Buchanan talks about the two different Greek words for time, *chronos* and *kairos*. Chronos "is the time of clock and calendar, time as a gauntlet, time as a forced march." In contrast, *kairos* "is time as a gift, as opportunity, as season."<sup>65</sup> Chronos pushes us along, tells us not to rest, tells us there's still so much to do and we'll never get it done because there aren't enough hours in the day. This is the kind of time that pushes most of American culture today. *Kairos* is the kind of time we are to live the Sabbath by (and every other day of the week, and perhaps eternity too). Practicing Sabbath teaches us to live in *kairos* time. It teaches us to ask "not 'What time is it?' but 'What is this time for?' *Kairos* is the servant of holy purpose."<sup>66</sup> A Sabbath well kept is a Sabbath kept in *kairos* time.

Buchanan speaks so passionately about choosing to spend Sabbath time well. For him it is about commitment to the day as if it were commitment to a spouse. "You

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<sup>63</sup> Carson, 326-327. (See Appendix 1 for a full description of rules from The Westminster Assembly's Directory for Public Worship).

<sup>64</sup> Heschel, 10.

<sup>65</sup> Buchanan, 36.

<sup>66</sup> Buchanan, 36.

pledge to commit yourself, all of yourself, to this time, and then you honor that commitment whether it's convenient or not."<sup>67</sup> Keeping the Sabbath is something the heart and mind and body must be in on together or it won't get kept. There are too many distractions pulling in too many directions for Sabbath to just happen naturally. The day must be approached with intent and planning. Being attentive is one of the key elements of Sabbath. It requires that those entering the day make a choice to be attentive to things around them. "Sabbath invites us to stop. In that ceasing, fresh possibilities abound. We can shut our eyes, if we choose—this is one of Sabbath's gifts, to relax without guilt. But there is also time enough to open our eyes, to learn again Jesus' command to *watch and pray*."<sup>68</sup> Imagine the transformation that could happen in the life of Christians, the church, the world, if, beginning with people in the church, we stood against chronos, committed ourselves to kairos time, entered fully into it and allowed God to show us things.

The answer to how one should keep Sabbath is not a "one size fits all" solution. Perhaps it is best left to individual communities, families and individuals to discover the best "how" for keeping Sabbath. Balancing the key elements of rest, worship and re-creating, each human needs to seek out how they can best enter into Sabbath rest. This brings us to our next question, discussing who should keep the Sabbath.

### **Who Should Keep the Sabbath?**

Because it is part of the creation mandate it seems that it is incumbent upon every human being to keep the Sabbath. There is a sense of it among all of humanity – the need for a day of rest. The need for worship and attentiveness to God is also part of the creation mandate, but those who are estranged from God have a hard time

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<sup>67</sup> Buchanan, 33.

<sup>68</sup> Buchanan, 51.

understanding this need, but they can articulate the need for rest. Bacchiocchi affirms that Sabbath is a creation mandate intended for all of humanity for all times. He quotes Aristobulus and Philo as agreeing with his point of view:

In Hellenistic (Greek) Jewish literature the Sabbath is unmistakably viewed as a creation ordinance designed for all people. Aristobulus, Philo's predecessor, for example, writes in the second century B.C. that "God the creator of the whole world has also given us the seventh day as rest because life is full of trouble for all men." Two centuries later Philo gave a much fuller treatment to the Sabbath. He not only traces the origin of the Sabbath to creation, but also delights to call it "the birthday of the world" Referring to the creation story, Philo explains: "We are told that the world was made in six days and that on the seventh God ceased from his works and began to contemplate what had been so well created, and therefore he bade those who should live as citizens under this world-order to follow God in this as in other matters." Because the Sabbath exists from creation, Philo emphasizes that it is "the festival not of a single city or country but of the universe, and it alone strictly deserves to be called public, as belonging to all people."<sup>69</sup>

As Jesus' contemporary, Philo had a grasp of Sabbath as being incumbent upon all of mankind. All of humanity should grasp the gift of the seventh day that had been given them and respond appropriately to it.

Buchanan notes that Sabbath was given to all of creation at the beginning of time. It was cemented in stone as part of God's will for his chosen people at Mt. Sinai:

It's a sheer gift. It is a stop-work order in the midst of work that's never complete, never polished. Sabbath is not the break we're allotted at the tail end of completing all our tasks and chores, the fulfillment of all our obligations. It's the rest we take smack-dab in the middle of them, without apology, without guilt, and for no better reason than God told us we could.<sup>70</sup>

Those who would say that humanity does not need to take Sabbath are denying themselves the gift that God gives for our own good. If one sees Sabbath as a burden, one would work to get rid of it, but if one sees it as the true gift that it is for all people for all time, one would embrace it, receive it, practice it. All people are meant to keep Sabbath because it is good for their whole well-being. If Christians could gain a proper

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<sup>69</sup> The statement is reported by Eusebius in *Praeparatio evangelica* 13, 12; Philo, *De Opificio Mundi* 89; *De Vita Mosis* 1, 207; *De Specailibus Legibus* 2, 59; Philo, *De Decalogo* 97; as quoted in Bacchiocchi, 43.

<sup>70</sup> Buchanan, 93.

perspective on what the day is, they could practice it in such a way that others would yearn for it and perhaps they too could be wooed into resting and then wooed to the heart of God. If Christians would take the lead, Sabbath keeping could be used as an evangelistic tool.

Bacchiocchi affirms the idea that Sabbath keeping is for everyone in saying, "The Sabbath is relevant for modern persons because it nourishes such a three-dimensional faith. The themes of the Sabbath, . . . encompass creation, redemption and final restoration; the past, the present and the future; man, nature and God."<sup>71</sup> So it bears on us as a modern society because Sabbath relates to all that we are, all that we do and all that we hope for.

According to Miller the commandments that the general population of the world and the church can understand have to do with how we relate to one another. When someone is challenged about being a sinner, they would be quick to respond with "I've never killed anyone" or "I've never committed adultery". But when pressed to answer about their relationship with God they may respond that those commandments are not as important anymore. Contrary to that view, Miller sees the commandments as having an active role in the life of the church today. "The commandments are thus the starting point of a rich trajectory of meaning and effects, principles and actions, that tell the community of faith how to live its life in relation to God and neighbor."<sup>72</sup> He believes that they are still the guiding principles for how we are to live as the people of God. They may not be the binding covenant to us that they were to the Israelites, but even under the new covenant of Jesus Christ, they have merit in guiding how Christians are to live their lives before God and one another.

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<sup>71</sup> Bacchiocchi, 19.

<sup>72</sup> Miller, 6.

Christians will argue that it is too hard for them to keep the Sabbath among their non-Christian neighbors. This is not a new concern for the Jews struggled with the same concern as they lived as aliens while in exile. They did not give up on the commandment because it was difficult but discovered ways to keep Sabbath even in a foreign land.<sup>73</sup> If today's Christians believe that they are called to keep Sabbath as the people of God they will seek a way to be obedient.

Heschel concludes his book with these wise and instructional words:

This is the task of men: to conquer space and sanctify time. We must conquer space in order to sanctify time. All week long we are called upon to sanctify life through employing things of space. On the Sabbath it is given us to share in the holiness that is in the heart of time. Even when the soul is seared, even when no prayer can come out of our tightened throats, the clean, silent rest of the Sabbath leads us to a realm of endless peace, or to the beginning of an awareness of what eternity means. There are few ideas in the world of thought which contain so much spiritual power as the idea of the Sabbath. Aeons hence, when of many of our cherished theories only shreds will remain, that cosmic tapestry will continue to shine.<sup>74</sup>

The authors referenced in this chapter represent the range of current thought regarding the keeping of Sabbath. There perhaps will never be unity of thought on when or how precisely to keep the day. But all of these authors conclude that there is a human need for rest and a quest of the soul to worship. Perhaps then it is the responsibility of each person who has faith in God to discover how God is calling them to practice Sabbath rest and Sabbath worship and then be faithful to keep it. In the time and place we live in, Christian unity may be found more easily in our beliefs than in our practices and perhaps in this season a time for a unified Sabbath day is impossible. If so, individuals must be encouraged to follow the God-giving yearning that is part of who they are.

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<sup>73</sup> Carson, 45.

<sup>74</sup> Heschel, 101.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE PROJECT: KEEPING SABBATH AS COMMUNITY**

As stated in the first chapter of this work, this research proposes that if Christians would commit themselves to the discipline of keeping the Sabbath holy, they would be realigned with God's design for them, receive the blessing of living within God's rhythm of work and rest, and rediscover the richness of living in spiritual community. This project set out to show these things to be true.

This chapter describes what the project was, who was involved, when the group gathered and the context that the personal and corporate practice took place. It lays out each week of the study and includes answers to questions from the journals of individual participants. Some of the answers to significant journal questions are compiled in Appendix D.

#### **Keeping Sabbath as a Small Group**

It is very difficult for one individual to embark upon a spiritual discipline that much of society, and the church, ignores. Sabbath keeping on one's own presents so many challenges that the person striving to keep Sabbath may quickly flounder alone. It is difficult to be the one who stops when everyone else is frantically moving forward. Therefore, this project was approached with community in mind and the idea that doing Sabbath as a group would be easier and would promote the community concept of the day.

The project involved a group of people in the study and work of keeping the Sabbath. The group met weekly to work through the study and at the conclusion of the study practiced on their own for four months before regrouping to discuss and turn in journals where they were to record the struggles and successes of keeping Sabbath.

The journals, kept throughout the study and the time on their own along with discussion in our times together make up the data collected for this chapter.

### **The Group Make-up**

This project took place within the congregation of the First Presbyterian Church of Rome, PA. The object was to get a variety of people from various stages in life to be a part of this study. Individual invitations were sent out to a select group of forty-four, asking them specifically to be involved in the study, but a general invitation was also extended to the whole congregation. Twenty-one of those who received letters responded affirmatively, and there were no additions from the general congregation.

Those who committed to participate included five married couples who came together, seven married women whose husbands are un-churched or weren't interested, one married man whose Catholic wife participated in the weekly exercises with her husband, one young single professional man, a single dad raising a teenage daughter, and a single older woman.<sup>1</sup> There was anticipation that those who shared the tasks of Sabbath keeping with other invested family members would have an easier time of it. This was not necessarily the case.

### **The Process**

The group agreed to meet on Sundays following worship. We usually shared a snack and coffee as we talked. We used the book *Catch Your Breath: God's Invitation to Sabbath Rest* by Don Postema, (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1997). Every individual or couple had a copy of the book, which they brought to use at each session as well as at home throughout the week.

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<sup>1</sup> More detailed demographic information is given in Appendix D.



Postema organized his book, intended for group use, to include a "Restful Beginning" which invited participants into a time of meditation and calming. From there the participants were involved in a time of "Reviewing" followed by "Reflecting". The reflection portion was the meat of the gathering as the group shared their responses to what had been presented in the chapter. The time together ended with "Sabbath Time" which offered the opportunity for the group to pull their thoughts together before they went off into their week. But each chapter concluded with "Home Alone" which challenged participants to act on a particular aspect of Sabbath throughout the week. Besides presenting the outline of the chapters, the introduction encouraged participants to write notes in their books as well as keep a journal. Participants were given a notebook and pen to aid and encourage them in this process. At the end, thirteen of the twenty-one participants turned in a journal.

Along with providing a group of people the opportunity to dip into the discipline of Sabbath keeping, another purpose for using this particular process and tool was to gather information on what draws people toward Sabbath keeping and what might push them away. It would also give some guidance on how to communicate the need for the discipline of Sabbath keeping to the broader population of the congregation. The discussion and journal entries proved to be very helpful in making these discoveries.

### **Week 1<sup>2</sup>: Introduction and Prologue**

After reading through the introduction, which led the group through the rhythm of each week's lesson, the group looked at the "Prologue". We read through the chapter together and the facilitator interjected questions along the way.

In the prologue, Postema says:

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<sup>2</sup> March 1, 2009.

This book comes out of weakness – I’m not very accomplished at sabbath-keeping and living. Yet it is part of a journey into a space and time that fascinates me. I long for sabbath attitudes and practices – not only for myself but also for you. I realize how essential they are for our spiritual formation. So I offer you an invitation to join me on this holy journey.<sup>3</sup>

The simple question put to the group after reading this was, “Can you relate?” The longing and yearning for times past and simpler ways was chorused among the group. Provided with specific questions, they were asked to think about this further using their journals for reflection. The purpose of this was to establish where everyone was starting from; what common ground was shared among the group; what assumptions could be made and what needed to be defined.

The first question participants were asked to reflect on was about the feelings towards entering into this journey. They responded in the group but were asked to spend more time on their own with their journal to dig a little deeper.

Participants came with mixed feelings about entering into the study and practice of Sabbath. Many were eager and hopeful with a desire for a meaningful change to the rhythm of their life. Most members of the group were able to articulate a desire to grow in their relationship with God, their family and with one another and even hoped to get to know themselves better. One or two expressed fear over not being able to do what might be required, unsure if they really wanted to focus on this particular discipline.

These are some of their responses:

I don’t necessarily want to keep the Sabbath! My 85 year old neighbor is my idea of a Sabbath Keeper who finds Sunday to be the longest day in her week although she does end it each evening by phoning her grand-children. I think having a Spiritual discipline that I could keep would help me grow spiritually but I might not have picked this one on my own. Mowing my lawn, sewing, shopping are activities I may not want to relinquish. Control issues, and “I want what I want, when I want it” – seem childish, but are where I seem to be starting. (SK1 3/1/09)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Don Postema, *Catch Your Breath: God’s Invitation to Sabbath Rest*, (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1997), 14.

<sup>4</sup> SK1, “Sabbath Keeping Journal”, personal journal entry, (March 1, 2009). Participants have been assigned a participant identification number which will be used when quoting from their journal

I eagerly approach this book, this class, this experience. When the day finally arrived for us to begin I thought about what I anticipated: a set of rules to follow for Sabbath keeping . . . I remembered growing up with “rules” – no dancing, no card playing. Rules that you either followed or NOT – black and white. So I’m thinking it will be pretty cool to have an author, scholar, and pastor set the rules and the group will serve as a support group encouraging all to follow the rules – yea! Shared responsibility; easier than going it on your own. But as I approached the classroom I knew Pastor would never take the “easy” road, that individually and as a group we will work to develop deeper understanding and growth. The excitement I feel knowing I’ll have to work and think and take time, is knowing I’m being given an opportunity to grow in a deeper relationship with God. (SK9)<sup>5</sup>

A combination of fear and hopefulness. Fear: Is this something I can really get a handle on and grab a hold of? Hopeful: that I can because I feel that spiritually I need this stronger connection with God; that it will help me in dealing with every day stressors such as work, family, children. I know that one of my biggest weaknesses is that I don’t know when to slow down and just allow myself to meditate on something. Practicing Sabbath keeping would probably help me to remember to slow down, relax and take time to enjoy living. (SK3)<sup>6</sup>

A second question was to find out what the participants thought of when they heard the word “Sabbath”. The answers reflected a fairly traditional understanding of the day. Most leaned towards a Sunday keeping of Sabbath and felt that it was a day set apart and should include worship, rest, and family. One talked about the need to slow down once a week and that keeping Sabbath was that opportunity.

These reflections on the definition of Sabbath were helpful in figuring out where to start redefining Sabbath with this group. Many had a very limiting definition and it became the task of the facilitator to broaden their understanding even moving beyond Sabbath as a “Sunday only” event.

The final question the group was asked to think about was what they were looking for and anticipating as they committed themselves to this project. The most frequent reply given in anticipation was “the pursuit of peace.” The lives of all those

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entries. Precise dates are given when they are provided in the original journal entry, but this does not happen very often. Journal entries can be found in Appendix D.

<sup>5</sup> SK9, “Sabbath Keeping Journal”, personal journal entry, (week of March 1, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> SK3, “Sabbath Keeping Journal”, personal journal entry, (week of March 1, 2009).

participating were hectic ones and the thing they hoped to experience most as a result of this study was peace:

A calming, peaceful place to step back, get a breath of fresh air, focus on God's Word, and become closer to Him. I do desire this relationship but I am not certain how disciplined I will be – with all the events pressing in at work. (SK4)<sup>7</sup>

I want the stuff of peace to be part of my soul so that it just leaks out when I stop, or even could calm people near me, too. For to share it is the key for me. (SK10)<sup>8</sup>

What they couldn't articulate but alluded to was the desire of being in the God given rhythm of work and rest:

To bring more meaning in all aspects of the sabbath, as I remember as a child. To slow down, reflect and open my heart to our Lord. (SK2)<sup>9</sup>

Making more room in my life to spend time with God. Oh, I get it – PRACTICE. The practice of spending time with God – so sabbath is every day – to develop a deep relationship with our Lord. A sabbath attitude; every day, spending time to rest, study, reflect, and respond to God. (SK9)<sup>10</sup>

Some expressed uncertainty about what might come of the study and one expressed resistance by stating that they were really doing this to "help the pastor with her thesis – keep an open mind and maybe learn something". (SK5)<sup>11</sup> But one other expressed an adventurous spirit as they embarked upon this time:

Since we have been married my spouse has worked a 7-day swing shift for 20 years and therefore was only off on a weekend a month. Our children were involved in sports and had games on Sundays. Now my spouse is off weekends and the children are now leaving the nest. I'm looking forward to my spouse and I starting new adventures and starting new traditions. (SK15)<sup>12</sup>

The assumption going into this study was that people today are too busy and are missing out on the joy of the Sabbath stopping. The responses to the questions posed

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<sup>7</sup> SK4, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of March 1, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> SK10, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of March 1, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> SK2, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of March 1, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> SK9, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of March 1, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> SK5, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of March 1, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> SK15, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of March 1, 2009).

in the first meeting seemed to support this theory and also that it is something perhaps more yearned for than actively pursued.

### **Week 2<sup>13</sup>: Sabbath as Mindfulness**

The second week began with a reflection on Sabbath reminders, particularly bells that may have called people to worship when they were young. This led to other reminders that set Sabbath apart in their childhoods; closed stores, special clothes, Sunday dinner, no lawn mowing. It also talked about the preparation of Saturday night leading into the Sabbath of Sunday and included memories of baths and laying out clothes. A lot of ritual was recited.

As people interacted with the book and the questions in the margins, their journaling revealed so much joy in times past when Sunday was spent in worship and rest. Some remembered strict observance, not being allowed to knit or crochet, while others were allowed to play games, even outside with others. There was a deep richness in this day separate from all others, from its preparation to its completion. Those folks of greater years were still maintaining a sense of Sabbath in their week.

However, there were those in the group who grew up in a later time or without a church background. They expressed missing out on something that they were yearning for now and wondering how to make it more a part of their life today. There was an understanding that setting aside time for Sabbath rest would not “just happen” but would need to be planned with determination and intentionality.

One of the big conversations in the group centered around the memories of church bells being rung. Often the comment was made about what a privilege it was to get to ring the bell. While many commented on church bells being significant in their lives for others, they meant nothing or something totally other than church.

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<sup>13</sup> March 8, 2009.

Bells were noted as calling “to” something rather than away from. Many folks in the group had worked in public schools and associated bells with something totally different than worship. The insight of one participant was particularly telling of today’s world view:

I work in a school where bells rule everyone’s schedule. Generally I view these bells as a reminder that I am running out of time to accomplish my work. It means I must move faster . . . After reading Chapter One, I am going to change my thinking of the bells. Whenever one rings, I am going to thank God for bringing me through another portion of my day.” (SK13)<sup>14</sup>

Bells tell this person to move faster. Like the yellow light at the intersection, when we get cues to slow down we speed up.

Postema presented a concluding challenge in this chapter: “let’s develop a form of sabbath observance that we can practice in our particular life circumstances, with our work or study schedule, family and friendship demands . . . ”<sup>15</sup> His point is that in today’s society it is impossible to prescribe a “one size fits all” method of practicing sabbath. This seems very apparent with this study group.

While this chapter did not present much new material for those participating it did end by stretching their thinking just a bit. Most were challenged to think about Sabbath mindfulness beyond what happens once a week and thought about incorporating Sabbath time into the rest of the week.

### **Week 3<sup>16</sup>: Sabbath as Rest**

It was observed in the group that there is a difference between a break in routine and “Sabbath rest”. The difference is in the focus of ones attention. For rest to be a

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<sup>14</sup> SK13, “Sabbath Keeping Journal”, personal journal entry, (week of March 8, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Postema, 25.

<sup>16</sup> March 15, 2009.

Sabbath experience one must be mindful of God in the midst of it, aware of God's renewing presence at work in our lives.

There seems to be a strong resistance to rest. It produces guilt. It appears to be honorable in our society to be always productive. The assumption is that if you are resting you are being idle and wasting time. If there is work to do there is no reason for not doing it. This is contrary to the practice of Sabbath in which God calls us to rest on purpose. The fourth commandment calls humanity to cease from labor and rest for a time but in today's society there is a huge push away from obeying that command with a long list of excuses to support the decision.

In a question from this chapter participants were asked to consider what they think when they hear the commandment voiced today. "What is it [*the fourth commandment*] for you? An imperative? An invitation? How do you respond to it? With guilt? By calling it outdated? With longing? With joy in keeping it?"<sup>17</sup>

Responses varied but no one voiced, at this time, that it was imperative to obey it. Many heard the commandment as an invitation but the responses varied from enthusiastic response to guilt, dread and failure. Some felt that it was outdated by the way we live our lives today and so many more opportunities to be busy on Sundays than there were when the commandment was first given. While one could argue that there are no more distractions standing between humanity and God than there were in the days of Moses, one should bear in mind that most of these people remember the days of Blue Laws and a time when the church was respected as Queen of Sunday and given the time and respect needed for people to worship and rest. There was a sense of loss as this was discussed and great yearning for how it used to be but not a lot of energy for restoring the time on their own. There was very much a defeatist attitude among the group.

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<sup>17</sup> Postema, 32.

Society demands that the American people be in constant motion. Along with the rest of our culture, Christians are compelled by the world we live in to keep going, to be busy, to not rest. As a result we are worn out, tired, too busy, unfulfilled, and unhappy. If the group represents society as a whole, there is a great desire to experience the fulfillment of rest but great reluctance to allow oneself the opportunity to take it. There is a lack of being empowered to stand against the flow and do what we know is right.

#### **Week 4<sup>18</sup>: Sabbath as Refreshment**

In this third chapter of the book, Postema talks about the need to breathe. He refers to Exodus 31:17 in which the seventh days rest of God is told about. Postema focuses on the concept of God "being refreshed". "The Hebrew carries the idea that when we are exhausted, we lose our identity, our soul. As we sometimes say, 'I'm just not myself.' When refreshed, we get that identity back and are re-souled."<sup>19</sup> This chapter explored the simple challenge of breathing and catching ones breath.

One couple shared the story, in their journal, of their son who died at seventeen months of a breathing problem. They could understand more uniquely than some others the difficulty in not being able to catch ones breath. They did not share this story with the group but it could have led to some good discussion on how difficult it is to watch others struggle to breathe just as it is difficult to watch others struggle through their days without being refreshed. As important as breathing is to our ability to live, so spiritual refreshment is to our spiritual lives.

Apparently this was a difficult concept for people to grapple with. Interesting stories emerged about breathing and not breathing. The journals had a lot of self-

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<sup>18</sup> March 22, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Postema, 41.



disclosure directed toward the intended reader. Makes one wonder if the breath of God that refreshes our souls also makes us more open to share our lives with others.

### **Week 5<sup>20</sup>: Sabbath as Receptivity**

The focus of this week was on receiving by paying attention to what God is doing in our world. The concept of contemplation was introduced. Each person was challenged to practice the discipline of contemplating and then journal about it.

The concept of being a “receiver” was very difficult for people to accept. Through the journal entries it was evident that most people would rather be a giver than a receiver because receiving means being obligated to the giver:

Many of us have a hard time receiving. Maybe we don't know how? When I have opened myself up to receiving it was a pleasure. So simple, but we make it so hard. (SK2)<sup>21</sup>

At first it made me feel selfish but the more I reflected on it, the more wonderful – receiving inspiration and strength is so important. (SK4)<sup>22</sup>

For many years I was not a graceful recipient . . . compliments were deflected; presents seen as a “problem” if I was unable to reciprocate; or just not accepted – I refused offer of housecleaning by my well-meaning boss when I had cancer treatments, etc. Letting others give because they want to without feeling guilty is relatively new and may help me be more appreciative of what God gives me as well. (SK1)<sup>23</sup>

It is hard to be are receiver when you are accustomed to “doing” all the time. When someone offers to do some thing for me, I often attempt to decline, or feel I need to “repay” them. We should be able to accept another's actions/gifts without the feeling of obligation. (SK3)<sup>24</sup>

There seems to be a lot of resistance to seeing Sabbath as something God gives us that we need to receive. The fear is that there are strings attached and that

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<sup>20</sup> March 29, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> SK2, “Sabbath Keeping Journal”, personal journal entry, (week of March 29, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> SK4, “Sabbath Keeping Journal”, personal journal entry, (week of March 29, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> SK1, “Sabbath Keeping Journal”, personal journal entry, (week of March 29, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> SK3, “Sabbath Keeping Journal”, personal journal entry, (week of March 29, 2009).

something might be required that the receiver is unwilling to give. We have become very suspicious as a society and do have a hard time getting our minds around a free gift with no strings attached:

The idea that we are receivers is interesting. I have never thought of it. At first it feels easy, but then, after thinking about it, I start to wonder what is expected in return? I know God wants us to receive his love, and his forgiveness, and other things. It's hard to imagine receiving without strings attached. What are they? (SK13)<sup>25</sup>

One participant moved forward to a place of acceptance. "It is good to be told to receive. A receiver is at the center of attention and although I am not personally very comfortable in the center of attention, I still long to BE IT to be the Loved One, the Receiver" (SK10).<sup>26</sup> Part of our being able to receive is having a clear understanding of who the giver is and who we are as receivers perhaps even why we are the intended receivers.

Contemplation is another term that needs to be defined. Most of the participants wrote that it was about pondering a problem and finding a solution. But others with a bit more spiritual experience were able to more quickly see it as Postema does that it is a way of paying attention to God and what God is doing. This is a particular task for Sabbath keeping that needs to be nurtured in the faith community.

Postema talks about our responsibility to focus during the Lord's Supper and when we come together for worship:

When we observe the sabbath time on Sunday and at Sunday worship, we are joining a practice with a long history in the church. It should be a time for fostering sabbath attitudes of rest, refreshment, receptivity, and attentiveness. A contemplative day of rest and worship.<sup>27</sup>

The participants were asked to journal about this idea and whether they felt that we work against it or towards it in our own worship, society and home. Most felt that they were

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<sup>25</sup> SK13, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of March 29, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> SK10, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of March 29, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Postema, 59.

usually able to focus on the sacrament and understood the significance of sharing the body and blood of Christ.

It was not surprising that some struggled to enter worship with a contemplative spirit because there is so much chatter prior to the start. One put it quite aptly in saying, "Most Sundays are very hard to prepare, because it is so noisy. I'm guilty too, but there have been many times, I try very hard not to start a conversation. (The organist) could play 'Happy Birthday' and most people wouldn't notice" (SK2).<sup>28</sup> This is a true fact not just in the Rome Presbyterian Church but also in many others. People come in to the sanctuary with a lot on their mind and feel the need to speak with others before they forget. They come into worship focused on the community rather than on worship of God and if they are not careful or skilled in focusing, they may never quite get to the place where they are paying attention to God in worship. One particular participant began to see the need to intentionally prepare:

What takes away: Taking a passive attitude – it is so easy to make mental lists for the coming day/week. To day dream – thinking back on the previous week and its activities, its hurts, its problems, its joys. To focus on distractions around me – "Oh yeah, I have to remember to tell so and so this" etc., watching interactions between people. What helps: Take time to center, focus on begin fully in the presence of God. If I don't stop at the very beginning of the worship service sometimes it takes time to catch the attitude of attentiveness. If I write and make notes I'm more attentive – deeper thinking – connected. (SK9)<sup>29</sup>

### **Week 6<sup>30</sup>: Sabbath as Release**

In this chapter, Postema begins with a discussion on Sabbath as freedom from slavery. As has been discussed in the previous chapter, Sabbath is not just a worship issue but also a justice issue:

Sabbath affirms the dignity of all people. When no one is working, it is hard to tell the difference between them by their achievements. They are equal as

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<sup>28</sup> SK2, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of March 29, 2009).

<sup>29</sup> SK9, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of March 29, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> April 5, 2009.

image bearers of God, as persons loved by God! So sabbath is a sign of divine grace, a reminder of who we are before God.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps one reason our culture has such a difficult time yielding to Sabbath is that we don't want to be equal with everyone else. If one believes that their work defines them, and that definition feeds the need of their ego, why would they want to stop? There is so much pride in overworking, in doing too much, in not taking rest. Pride is one enemy of the Sabbath and it resides deep within our working culture. One participant reflects on this truth in their journal:

I changed churches because of not feeling we are all equal on Sabbath. I came from a church where there was a definite "in" crowd. I've seen individuals ostracized and driven away for not being the "right sort of person". I know church is open for everyone regardless. By extension, Sabbath is an equalizer. Who cares what your last name is, where you live where you work, or how much money you make? God doesn't care. We are all his. (SK13)<sup>32</sup>

But our culture does care about all of these things and enslaves it's citizens by getting us to define ourselves by what we do and what reputation we have cultivated for ourselves. For Sabbath to serve as an equalizer, the church needs to see itself as a place where that can happen.

Postema contrasts the idea of slavery with friendship and proposes that we are friends of God. For some in the group this was a new concept and many feelings of unworthiness to be a friend of God were expressed as this participant put it:

I have a hard time considering myself worthy to be God's friend – yet I do yearn for that feeling of friendship with him. I do find myself turning to him and talking to him a lot more frequently – as a friend through this study. (SK4)<sup>33</sup>

Most of the ideas about maintaining a friendship with God were built around spiritual disciplines of prayer and study. No one immediately expressed the desire to play with God, which was Postema's next thought on Sabbath, that it should include

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<sup>31</sup> Postema, 66.

<sup>32</sup> SK13, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of April 5, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> SK4, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of April 5, 2009).

prayer and play, but some did reflect on the possibility and journaled about things they did on a Sabbath that could be considered “play”.

### **Week 7<sup>34</sup>: Sabbath as Refocusing**

The final chapter of Postema’s book dealt with the way Sabbath is intended to re-shift our focus. It is easy to be drawn away from God in the midst of secular jobs and secular family demands so as we return to the Sabbath, we return to God and allow the time we spend in worship to redefine who we are.<sup>35</sup> Postema states that Sabbath is “an opportunity for that radical kind of refocusing. It is a chance to lift our gaze to the sacred, to readjust our minds, realign our hearts, reset our priorities, clarify our commitments, and enlarge our perspective.”<sup>36</sup>

As the people of God stop and come together to worship they are inviting God to speak into their lives. “Sabbath is the time for being in the presence of the holy and letting the holy shape our lives.”<sup>37</sup> This is transformation. This is what God longs for in the lives of God’s disciples but they are often too busy to participate.

For this week people were to think about what their past experiences of God had been like; when they felt the need to refocus their attention and how they might do that; and how they prepared themselves for worship.

Participants who responded to the question about where they had experienced God in the past fell into three categories: nature, church, and the death of a loved one. For many it was all of the above:

When I hang laundry on the clothesline. I usually only do this when the sun is out and it is warm. It feels so great to be in the sun, and I love the smell of

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<sup>34</sup> April 19, 2009. We did not meet on Easter Sunday, April 12<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> Postema, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Postema, 77.

<sup>37</sup> Postema, 77.

laundry dried outside. I find myself singing and thanking God for creating the world. I also felt very close to God when my grandmother died. I was alone with her and had called everyone else in. I knew they wouldn't make it in time and I believe that is how she wanted it. I spent the last few moments with her stroking her head and telling her it was OK to go. I knew God was with us and was very thankful He ended her suffering. I had a student suffer a cardiac arrest at school. I performed CPR on her for 30 minutes before the ambulance arrived. I never got tired, never lost my focus, and was able to tell others around me what to do. I could feel God with me, keeping me strong. Afterwards I looked down and realized my necklace which happens to be a cross had come out from under my shirt during the whole event. The more I ponder on this, the more I truly realize He is always close to me I just have to listen. (SK13)<sup>38</sup>

For many it was taking walks around their homes or experiencing God's power and presence at the beach that they felt best in touch with God and had an understanding of God's love for them. For others it was the time spent in church. Music plays a huge role in helping people feel the presence of God. For still others it was walking with a loved one through the valley of the shadow of death that gave them a real sense of God's presence. No matter what the circumstances, the folks understood what it was to encounter God in a real and tangible way.

Postema asked participants to think about the need for refocusing and all agreed that this was something that needed to happen regularly in their lives. Not just once a week but much more frequently throughout the day:

Quiet time in the mornings, starts my day with God. Stopping and taking a breath – to refocus. Listening to the organ on Sunday mornings – before and during collection really helps me to feel inner calmness. (SK2)<sup>39</sup>

I think weekly if not daily we all need to focus our vision, priorities, and life. Attending church, Bible study, and since we started Sabbath time, I probably do it more than I used to. (SK8)<sup>40</sup>

I definitely need to take times to get things back into focus. I get caught up in the every day hustle and bustle of life. Work and Family – Always in a hurry. I need to learn to slow down and relax. I need to learn that I can't do everything myself. I need to learn to lift my worries to God. I've been trying to do this the past several weeks, but it is not easy for me. I pray and lift them to God, but some

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<sup>38</sup> SK13, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of April 19, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> SK2, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of April 19, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> SK8, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of April 19, 2009).

how I'm not able to completely let them go. I know I need to and I know things are not always in my control. But this is a lot easier said than done for me. (SK15)<sup>41</sup>

Some indicated that there were tools they picked up during our study that assisted them in this challenge to refocus. For some it was their morning quiet time, for others the breathing that we learned. One woman found she needed to remove herself from her office and spend time in the bathroom to be able to pray for the situation that was presenting itself at any given moment.

In preparing themselves for worship, people tend to take advantage of helps ready at hand. One listens to spiritual music on the drive to church. Others depend on the organ prelude to get them where they need to be to worship. Another meets with a group to pray for the service before it begins and finds this truly prepares her heart to be present to God. Here is a description of what worked for one of the participants:

While lighting a candle and having time for meditation or "extra Bible reading" on Saturday night hasn't established itself – yet – perhaps it will be a special once a month occasion. For now, a core of our small group Bible study meets at 9:00 a.m. to share a Bible passage or thought from Daily Bread. We pray for the Pastor and congregation and ask that Karen deliver and the congregation receive the message God has for us that day. For me, praising God begins in the small group prayer time. It allows me to be in the Sanctuary with a smile on my face (hopefully) and able to greet friends/new folks and listen to them if needed – before continuing to praise God with them in worship. I am a little more connected than sliding in at 9:29 ½ a.m. (SK1)<sup>42</sup>

The point that Don Postema is making in his book is that these things need to happen in order to experience Sabbath and be transformed by it. The participants were at a place by this time to catch that the things they had been introduced to during the study were making a difference in how they lived and viewed life. Sabbath practices were beginning to take root as they prepared to journey forward.

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<sup>41</sup> SK15, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of April 19, 2009).

<sup>42</sup> SK1, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of April 19, 2009).

### **Week 8<sup>43</sup>: Epilogue - A Personal Experience**

The group met once more to talk about how they would practice Sabbath once the sessions were over. They were asked to continue practicing and journaling about the experience for three months. The group would reconvene after that time to turn in journals and talk about the experience. They were asked to find accountability partners whom they would share their goals with and whom they would check in with from time to time to see how things were going.

### **Follow-up<sup>44</sup>**

The group study ended in the spring and participants had the summer to put into use what they had learned in practicing Sabbath. As the group gathered early in early September, there were different levels of satisfaction at how the time had gone. In preparation for this follow-up meeting the participants were asked to think about four questions.

The first question was, "In all the things discussed, what motivated you the most to keep Sabbath?" Some responded that because it was a commandment from God it ought to be kept. Others reported that it felt good to take the time. And others felt it was the Sabbath keeping community that motivated them:

I felt it was the right thing to do after all it is God's commandment! We were raised to not work on the Sabbath, but I never understood that the focus is not the absence of work, but the time to relax, rest, and be present to God. Reading through *Catch Your Breath* and the discussions with this group made me realize more and more how important Sabbath keeping is. It's not just something I should do, but it is essential to my relationship with God. (SK9)<sup>45</sup>

I think just every day life keeps you busy and the last thing I ever thought about was keeping the Sabbath. I was not brought up keeping it and never thought about it. But sitting there in our group on Sundays after church and discussing

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<sup>43</sup> April 26, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> September 20, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> SK9, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of September 20, 2009).



the Sabbath made me stop and think Big Time. What a wonderful thing to think about and what sense it makes. (SK15)<sup>46</sup>

Keeping the Sabbath seems respectful to God. This study made me realize that Sabbath is a gift from God and a much needed rest both physically and spiritually. It is restoration for the body and soul. (SK6)<sup>47</sup>

My desire to learn to slow down and to help teach my children that it is okay to have a "do nothing day" and reflect and remember what gifts God has given us. The weekly meetings were what kept me on track in the beginning. It made me accountable each week to be prepared for a discussion and it served as a weekly reminder of what my goal was. Once these meetings stopped, I lost that accountability and that is pretty much where the journaling got lost. (SK3)<sup>48</sup>

The second question was, "What was most helpful for you to cease from in order to have a Sabbath mindset?" This one seemed more difficult for people to answer. While one person responded that they needed to "cease just sliding into Sunday" and confessed that they needed to do preparation work, the other respondents all noted cutting down on errands and work unless those things truly brought them an element of joy.

The third question was, "What made you 'hang in there' or 'hang it up'?"

The greatest consensus was that keeping Sabbath made one feel good and this encouraged some to stick with it:

The main thing that made me "hang in there" was how wonderful Sabbath Keeping made me feel. Because I'm a doer, what I learned through the course of this study was I don't have to feel guilty about doing "nothing". Being a doer turned out to be a very positive characteristic, because instead of doing nothing I, of course, had to do something so I began to focus more on God. I feel more relaxed. Why? because through the weeks I think I'm becoming a friend to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because I STOPPED on the Sabbath, I'm learning to carry on conversations (not desperate pleas!) with God. I find God pops up more and more in my daily conversation with friends and family, which always intimidated me prior to our study. (SK9)<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> SK15, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of September 20, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> SK6, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of September 20, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> SK3, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of September 20, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> SK9, "Sabbath Keeping Journal", personal journal entry, (week of September 20, 2009).

Overall, I think I hung in there. The busyness of summer did interfere some. One thing I have found is that I get more off track if I miss more than one week of attending church. Going and participating in the weekly service brings me back and I reflect and remember the blessings I have and what God really wants from me. (SK3)<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the time was not kept perfectly but desire had set in for many of the participants. For those who “hung it up” the blame went to a busy summer schedule or trying to do it on one’s own while living with others who had no interest in keeping Sabbath.

The final question was, “What would have helped you really commit to keeping Sabbath (i.e. more education, being convinced that it’s necessary, continued meeting as a group, gathering for a starting Sabbath service)?” From the answers to this question and ongoing conversation and observation, several things became clear. First, there were those who had been transformed by the experience and who were intent on continuing to pursue both a Sabbath attitude and using Sunday as a call to Sabbath rest and worship. Nonetheless, there were four others who admitted that staying with this discipline was not going to continue to be a high priority. Secondly, those who were interested in maintaining a Sabbath practice would best benefit from continuing, in some form, with a group who was like-minded and having all spouses converted to the same mindset. Although participants confessed that it was the meeting together that most motivated them, none were willing to commit to a longer period of time of meeting together.

One participant concluded her journal with this statement:

I strongly doubt that I am willing to keep the Sabbath, as I understand it. Sabbath keeping for the Amish, 7<sup>th</sup> Day Baptists or Adventists, Jews, and our Union Valley Mennonites has community wide expectations and social conformity – not so in the PCUSA or Protestants generally. Expectations and accountability have been lost, and it is truly a community activity that is gone. (SK1)<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> SK3, “Sabbath Keeping Journal”, personal journal entry, (week of September 20, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> SK9, “Sabbath Keeping Journal”, personal journal entry, (September 19, 2009).

This is a sobering truth. Expectations and accountability have been largely lost in mainline denominations of the Church. Anyone who wants to practice Sabbath is going to have to have a high commitment level to the discipline because there is nothing in society that encourages it.

### **Evaluation of the Project**

Overall the purpose of the study was accomplished. The concept of Sabbath keeping was introduced to a group of people. That group spent a season grappling with the implications of Sabbath keeping and then sharing their experience. A few walked away inspired by a possible new way of being and others went right back to business (or busyness) as usual.

Those for whom the discipline had a lasting impact have been keeping up with daily prayer and Bible reading. They continue to try to stop when things are getting out of control to pray and bring concerns to God. Some are aware that as their world changes, the things they choose to enjoy the Sabbath will need to change. For example, the growth of traffic on the roadways has lessened the freedom and enjoyment of working in the yard on a Sunday afternoon. The birdsong and quiet have been exchanged for the noise and unwelcome company of trucks on the road.

The process of going through Don Postema's book worked quite well in communicating information regarding Sabbath and providing tools for participants to work with. The study also served to help participants put ideas into action as they paid attention to what was going on in their lives, the lives of others and in their relationship with God. The study and practice of Sabbath requires life-long learning and practice and, in hindsight, it would have been better if the facilitator had known then what she

knows now after doing more reading and research. It may have been helpful to provide them with more historical and theological background for Sabbath keeping.

Another lesson learned was that the journaling process should have been explained more precisely. Most of the participants journaled diligently, but the different styles and understandings of what the reader was after sometimes made it difficult to decipher the information that was wanted. Printed questions in a customized journal may have produced a better consistency in answers, but the richness of personal interpretation and the openness for participants to share what was on their heart was a rich gift to the reader who then had the task of interpreting what information really answered the questions that were being asked.

One on one interviews would have been a useful follow-up and allowed for clarification and the opportunity to encourage some folks to go a little deeper in their own discoveries. This was a missed opportunity to help people grow one on one, but it is possible that those who are truly hungry for the discipline will seek out the facilitator and ask how they might grow into the discipline. There is a deeper relationship between the participants and the pastor-facilitator of the group because of the time and stories shared and this is a rich gift within the congregation.

Leaving the project with the thought that more could have been done goes along with the constant challenge that keeping Sabbath presents, however, the information that was gleaned from the project can be used to set up some next steps in how to introduce the entire congregation to the concept of keeping Sabbath and that will be discussed and plotted out in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **REINTRODUCING THE IDEA OF SABBATH KEEPING**

The Sabbath keeping project told many stories and raised a few questions. The task in this concluding chapter is to look at what the study revealed about common church folk and their desire and ability to keep the Sabbath holy. Using these discoveries a look will be taken at what that might mean for Sabbath in our culture; possibilities and absolutes. Finally a plan will be laid out for the congregation of the Rome Presbyterian Church on how to invite and woo that particular congregation into taking a deeper look at keeping the fourth commandment.

#### **What the Study Revealed**

The people in the study were willing to admit that they are overworked and over busy as are many other Americans. They can identify that they are worn down or worn out by the pace they are keeping. But not everyone wants to change. They understand that changing requires discipline and developing a discipline takes time and, in general, feel there's no more time to spare, so they choose to remain the same.

Some of the struggles people have with keeping Sabbath were revealed in this study through their journaling, the group discussion, and through private confession. One realization that came to bear was that there was not a strong desire to think about what God wants for those who claim to be God's children. It is easier to dismiss the fourth commandment as being an outdated rule rather than thinking about why God put it there in the first place. Acknowledging the law to keep Sabbath holy still does not have a strong pull when Christians aren't able to grasp their relationship to God or their identity in Christ and the fact that what God desires for them does matter.

Another struggle revealed was that old habits are hard to break. People who lived under the Blue Law years ago may yearn for those times when they didn't have a choice to shop on Sunday, but they are not willing to change now and go back. Society has slowly been allowed to dictate when Americans will shop, have sporting events and work. This generation of people, Christians included, feel powerless to stand against the constant opportunity to be on the move. The general population follows the path of least resistance and tends to do whatever they are invited to do on Sabbath whether it is work, shop, or attend sporting events.

Those who participated in the project are fairly regular church attend-ers except when the above-mentioned activities arise. They do not have a problem coming to worship, in fact it is vital to their lives. But they really don't want to have anything more required of them. The idea of "daily Sabbaths" and adopting a Sabbath attitude throughout the week had much greater appeal then setting aside a twenty-four hour period of time to worship, rest and play. In the conversations, there was more concern about how far one could push the envelope on activity and still call it rest rather than on how one could cultivate a closer relationship with God during the time God gives his people to stop. Understanding that Sabbath is time for God has been a difficult concept to grasp in the study.

While a very few gave themselves over to remaking themselves into Sabbath keepers some seemed relieved to be done with the project which produced guilt when they weren't willing or able to "do Sabbath right". Many did discover the value of spending quiet time with God and journaling and they will continue this practice. The discipline of Sabbath keeping is difficult without the commitment to and accountability of a group. Encouragement and help will be needed if this group is to grow in their ability to take time from their week to stop and be present to God and themselves. They have been given some tools that they may utilize but it really is difficult on one's own.

Perhaps, when the topic is presented again, with a little experience under their belts, they may be wooed to go a little farther.

Time and people presented themselves as the biggest roadblocks to keeping Sabbath. People in our culture want to dominate time and their own lives. We live unsundered to God. The idea of setting aside time specifically for God and the idea that maybe we do not own time but God does and that God wants us to use some of that time for being with God, is a challenging idea. Families can get in the way of trying to keep Sabbath. If the practice is new and not everyone in the house is on the same page, there's little support for an individual in that situation and Sabbath keeping can easily get pushed aside.

### **What that Means for Sabbath in Our Culture**

A cultural Sabbath is not coming back anytime soon. There is not enough conviction, energy, or people to pull it off. Our society will continue to overwork, and overplay and grow more distanced from God, all the while yearning for simpler times. Sadly, the Church in general, is not in a place to assist with this task as it too is caught up in the busyness of society, creating it's own rushed pace. Rather than grieve what is past, the challenge is to see what can be done in the present.

Believing that all humans are designed to receive the gift of Sabbath time and that they are not whole without it, this writer believes that something needs to be and can be done. It would be easier to leave it all alone and adopt the attitude that if people don't know what they're missing, why stir things up. But the belief is that God knows what they're missing and very much wants them to understand that they are missing this gift. As pastor of a people it is one's responsibility to care about those people and teach them God's truth. This will not change the world; it may not significantly change the congregation at the Rome Presbyterian Church. But maybe it will transform one person

who will make Sabbath keeping a practice they pass down to their family and for that family it will make a difference.

This writer is no expert on keeping Sabbath, often choosing to tap on the brakes but often not coming to a complete stop. Family and time can be cited as the roadblocks that prevent a full stop. Sabbath keeping is a struggle to begin but hopefully easier as it becomes a discipline. But for it to become a discipline for anyone there needs to be desire and perceived need. The task of this preacher is then to woo the congregation to a place where God can show them the divine gift of Sabbath God has for them and prepare them to be ready to receive it. The following is an idea of how that might happen in the Rome congregation.

### **The Plan to Encourage Sabbath Keeping**

People in the First Presbyterian Church of Rome are busy. History over the last several years has shown that adults will not stay after or come early for a Sunday School class. Although there are increasingly more small groups developing naturally among the members, when the invitation is extended from the pulpit to start something new, there is not a lot of interest. Small groups seem to happen by personal invitation and are limited to a very few people. Therefore if Sabbath keeping is going to be taught, it needs to come from the pulpit where the audience is captive and in an attitude to listen and receive.

This observation leads to the need for a sermon series on Sabbath keeping. It might best be preached during a Lenten season when there is openness to new disciplines and the taking on of a challenge. The congregation is very flexible and, especially during a special season of the year, would be willing to try something new. The worship service is constantly in flux and trying something new within worship is never a problem, if the timing is right. All this to say that there is room here to freely



challenge the congregation to something new. Following is an outline of what could work in this particular setting.

### **A Proposed Preaching Series on Sabbath Keeping**

During the Sabbath study people were eager to experiment with Sabbath time when it suited them. Sabbath as one particular day set apart, the entire twenty-four hours, was pushed aside. In this preaching series, with the whole congregation gathered, there will be more of an emphasis on keeping Sunday as Sabbath.

Being in worship is an important starting point and a good place to show the congregation that they are already practicing one aspect of Sabbath on Sunday. This revelation may encourage them to try adding one more aspect of Sabbath to their day. The challenge will be to not push too hard and discourage people but to woo them into a place of desire and giving into the yearning that is in them because they belong to God. Before the series begins there will be an invitation sent to every member to attend worship, hinting that what they hear could change their lives.

Following is a proposed outline of the series. Prior to each week the congregation would be invited to read over the Scripture passages that will be addressed in the sermon so that those who choose could have a bearing on what is being talked about. This series of "teaching sermons" would be a different style of preaching than they are used to but many would be excited for something different.

#### **Week 1: History of Sabbath - Creation through Mt. Sinai**

This introduction would focus on the creation story and God's day of rest. It would carry on through the experience of the Israelites in Egypt and their exodus and the point of God giving them the commandments, focusing on how significant the fourth commandment would have been for them. The application would be for the

congregation to look at their own lives and discover whom their taskmasters are that push them to keep going without rest and time for devotion to God. Mark Buchanan has a chapter in his book *The Rest of God*,<sup>1</sup> that discusses task masters and a "Sabbath Liturgy" at the end which might be useful in sending home with the congregation to contemplate.

The purpose of this week would be to set down the beginning of a theological framework to support keeping Sabbath. Much of the information for the sermon would come from the work previously done in this thesis. This would be a week of laying groundwork for what is to come and hopefully the application assignment would help them begin to think through some of the reasons they do not give Sabbath keeping much thought.

#### Week 2: History of Sabbath - Jesus and Sabbath

During this week the Gospel passages that tell of Jesus interacting with the Jewish leaders over the Sabbath would be the foundation of the sermon. The congregation would be led through the accounts to see what they reveal about Jesus' understanding of keeping the Sabbath holy. The themes of Jesus' choosing the time to heal and carry out God's justice would be a focal point as well as pointing out that Jesus did observe the Sabbath but in a greater way than those who were confronting him.

These passages and the topic would lend itself to a discussion on legalism. Mark Buchanan<sup>2</sup> addresses and prescribes a Sabbath liturgy contrasting legalism with joy. The concluding invitation would be for the congregation to look at their own ideas of how Sabbath should be kept and what of those ideas do they hold dear or push away

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Buchanan, *The Rest of God: Restoring Your Soul By Restoring Sabbath*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 85-102.

<sup>2</sup> Buchanan, 103-119.

from. They would be asked to distinguish the ways they might find joy in Sabbath keeping.

The purpose of this week's message would be to show the congregation that Jesus held up the practice of Sabbath and revealed how to keep it in ways that brought glory to the Father and justice and healing to those who were in need. This sets the stage for inviting the congregation to follow Jesus as Sabbath keepers.

### Week 3: Eternal Sabbath

Using Hebrews 4:1-13 which speaks of the Sabbath rest for the people of God, the focus of this week will be on eternal rest. The emphasis will be on how keeping Sabbath on earth prepares us for the eternal Sabbath we will experience with God for eternity. Abraham Joshua Heschel and Francis Nigel Lee both speak about this concept and their thoughts and ideas would be shared.

The purpose would be to remind the congregation that we generally live without an awareness of eternity. We are very grounded in the here and now. Perhaps part of the push away from keeping Sabbath is that it is a waste of time on earth. If one thinks that this is where all the living is done and must be done to the full before they die, they will not be thinking about the eternal consequences and blessings of what they do now. For the majority of these good Presbyterians, eternity is not something we think much about preparing for beyond "getting saved". This would be an opportunity to bring to mind that this world is not all there is. God intends to be reunited with us in a real and tangible way and our being prepared for that could impact our eternal experience.

### Week 4: Why Sunday

This week would focus on a timeline of the history of Sabbath keeping from the New Testament through today. The transition from Saturday as Sabbath to Sunday

would be traced and discussed. Presenting that the reason Christians worship on Sunday was due perhaps more to convenience than on theological grounds will be a bit controversial in this congregation and will hopefully encourage them to think a little bit harder about why we do what we do.

While Sunday Sabbath may be optimal in this particular faith community it will be impossible for some. The option for another day will be brought forward but the emphasis will stay on a twenty-four hour period that would involve some kind of gathering and worship. If there are persons to whom this is appealing it may require a mid-week service to emerge.

The aim would be to encourage the congregation to see the importance of choosing one day in seven to gather for worship and set aside time for rest and play. A homework assignment might be to have the listeners pick out the best twenty-four hours surrounding worship that they could consistently practice Sabbath.

#### **Week 5: Rediscovering our Identity - Revealed in Creation and in Christ**

Believing that one thing that is restored in Sabbath keeping is the revelation of the Christian's true identity and that this is important in living as disciples of Jesus Christ, this week will look at our identity as it is revealed in Scripture at the time of creation and in Christ. Revealing that the world, our current society, and sin have stripped us of comprehending our true identity as children of God an invitation will be given to reclaim who we really are.

Presenting the idea again that all of humanity, made in the image of God has a yearning for the rhythm of rest and work, it will be suggested that Sabbath plays a key role in this reclamation of our identity. Living into this identity will restore balance and rhythm in the life of the disciple of Jesus Christ.

## Week 6: Learning God's Rhythm - The Invitation

This week will be a transition from history and information giving to the more practical side of Sabbath keeping. We will look at what is involved in God's rhythm of going and stopping, at why that rhythm is important in the life of humans in general and Christians specifically. Reference may be made to those in the study and others in the congregation who stop for a few minutes every day to pray and have devotions and how that impacts their day. The challenge will be to see if we can practice that on a larger scale and take an entire day to focus our attention on God. It will need to be stressed that this invitation comes from God. It is God who desires the time and attention, not the church or the pastor.

This week will serve also as an introduction to the following four weeks in which we will employ Marva J. Dawn's ideas from *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*. Her ideas of ceasing, resting, embracing and feasting will be the guide. It would be great to invite those who desire to go deeper to purchase a copy of the book and take some time during these four weeks to meet and discuss the sections of the book, hopefully helping them to commit to the practice.

## Week 7: Learning God's Rhythm - Ceasing (preparation)

Ceasing from the normal routine is preparatory for what one participates in on the Sabbath. Part of the teaching of the day will be on the importance of preparation and asking the congregation to reflect on their childhood Saturday evenings as was done in the project study. This is a key component to keeping Sabbath and should not be glanced over.

Dawn has seven different categories to cease from in her book but of those the sermon will hit on ceasing from work<sup>3</sup>, and ceasing from trying to be God<sup>4</sup>. The first may appear obvious but the congregation may be helped by a better definition of work and what God desires us to cease from. Dawn's point that "it is a ceasing in order to honor the covenant God"<sup>5</sup> needs to be stressed with those who try to justify their tasks in such a way to make them okay to do on the Sabbath. While it must be admitted that one persons work is another person's leisure, the congregation needs to be honest about what they choose to identify as work activities.

The second focus of ceasing to be God is described by Dawn as a major blessing of the Sabbath that we too often miss out on. She says, "On that day we do nothing to create our own way. We abstain from work, from our incessant need to produce and accomplish, from all the anxieties about how we can be successful in all that we have to do to get ahead." The reality that the congregation will be invited to face is that in refusing to take a Sabbath we choose to be self-sufficient and do not allow God to bless us in our resting and in his ability and desire to sustain us.

The congregation will be invited to look at how this may be true in their lives. They will be asked to look at their excuses for not taking a twenty-four hour day and see if those excuses point to their need for being self-sufficient and afraid to rely on God to sustain them.

#### Week 8: Learning God's Rhythm - Rest

In her chapter on rest, Dawn looks at the topic wholistically. Having chosen to cease from labor the next logical step is to rest. The sermon will define all four areas of

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<sup>3</sup> Marva J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 5-16.

<sup>4</sup> Dawn, 28-35.

<sup>5</sup> Dawn, 6.

rest suggested in this chapter: spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual<sup>6</sup> and the need for rest in each category. But what might be most helpful in this presentation are Dawn's "Aids for Rest"<sup>7</sup>

This would be a good time to help the congregation think through each aspect of rest and encourage them to find a way to break away from routine and seek God in something other. The way people in the congregation choose to live only in their comfort zone would most definitely need to be addressed. This is the routine most of the congregants would like to stay in and will find it difficult to move from but it is definitely what keeping Sabbath challenges.

#### Week 9: Learning God's Rhythm - Embracing

The previous two week's topics were about stopping, letting go, and making room. This week, attention turns to what congregants may choose to occupy that created space with. Marva J. Dawn calls it "embracing" and includes seven different areas of embracing Sabbath values.<sup>8</sup> In embracing these things participants can apply a Christian lifestyle on Sabbath that will overflow into the rest of their week. For Dawn this is all about imitating the Creator in Whose image we are all made.

Probably the most pertinent point of embracing that would meet the needs of the Rome congregation is the one titled "Embracing the Values of the Christian Community".<sup>9</sup> It is here that the truth is laid out that being called the people of God sets us apart from the rest of society. But do we as Christians, as a congregation, live our lives in such a unique way that the world sees us as being different? Scripture calls us

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<sup>6</sup> Dawn, 53-83.

<sup>7</sup> Dawn, 84-87.

<sup>8</sup> Dawn, 99-148.

<sup>9</sup> Dawn, 111.

to be separate from the world and this may be the time to look closely to some of those passages such as Romans 12:2 and John 17:6-17. The congregation may be at a place to consider these Scriptures seriously as they flow out of the Sabbath keeping process defined thus far.

Perhaps the bottom line in this sermon will be to encourage the listeners to choose with intention and purpose how they spend their Sabbath hours and indeed all of their hours as they grow in faith and spiritual maturity and seek to live as disciples of Jesus Christ rather than disciples of the current societal culture.

#### Week 10: Learning God's Rhythm - Play and Feasting

In the final chapter of her book Marva J. Dawn proposes that one last vital part of keeping Sabbath involves feasting. She brings in such areas as music, beauty and food, which one might expect, but also includes the eternal, affection and festival as things to feast upon. The Rome congregation will be able to relate easily to music, beauty and food. These will serve as a common ground on which to start the discussion and then move to what it means to feast on the eternal. Coming back around to the eternal is a good place to conclude the series as it will serve as a reminder that all of our Sabbath keeping is merely a shadow of the eternal Sabbath to which all Christians are destined.

In this section Dawn also draws in the role of worship as something to feast upon:

Even as we must stand under the Scriptures in order to understand them, so the attitudes and actions necessary for worship let God be the subject. We wait expectantly for his revelation of himself rather than try to manipulate him or put on a show or fulfill an obligation. We do not go to church; we enter into a worship experience. The order of worship is not worship; it makes space and time for worship to happen – but if we continue to remain the subject (focusing on *our* actions of worship), then true worship never materializes. The difference between thinking and worship is that in the latter, God is the subject. Through the liturgy or the Word or the community, he invades. To adore God, to bow before him and to await his revelation causes us to focus on his character and



meditate on his presence in the sublime mystery of receiving his gracious gift of himself.<sup>10</sup>

The Rome congregation is used to being challenged on the point of actively participating in worship and anticipating that God will show up. This provides another opportunity to look at worship with God as the focal point of what we do as we worship, sing, pray, read, announce, receive offering. It is all about God. It is what God desires of the people God calls his own. Keeping the Sabbath is also something God desires of this people.

#### Follow-up

At the conclusion of the series it would make sense to offer the people an opportunity to make a deeper commitment to Sabbath keeping. How this takes shape may depend on feedback throughout the later weeks of the series. The commitment may take the form of continued discussion and reading on the topic or on a time to gather either before or after worship to be supported in the intentions people have to carry out the Sabbath as they leave the church. Or perhaps there might be the offer of accountability that begins with phone calls on a Saturday afternoon reminding those who choose to participate that it's time to make final preparations for the Sabbath as it comes.

It will be interesting to see what develops in this particular setting. This approach may have a completely different outcome in a more urban area. In a place that had the benefit of different cultures, such as a Jewish community, there might be the opportunity to watch and see how one's neighbors were able to keep their Sabbath holy. In a larger congregation with adult classes, this might work for a group willing to commit themselves to the process. Even in a much smaller church with an attendance of under twenty, it

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<sup>10</sup> Dawn, 160.

might be a very worthwhile experiment. It probably would not be effective if the facilitator, preacher, or teacher were not passionate about the desire to see people involved together in this discipline. It is a difficult one.

### **Conclusion**

The topic of keeping the Sabbath was chosen because the writer had a deep yearning to learn more about and become a more faithful practitioner. It was hoped that having gathered all the information and being steeped in the rich biblical, theological and historical wisdom and teaching on Sabbath, that one would come out prepared to be the ideal Sabbath keeper. But this has not been the case. Information and desire are not enough to transform one into a faithful keeper of the Sabbath. It requires discipline and intentionality and a little planning.

In this pastor's heart, there is a great desire to see, in the Rome Christian community, a Sabbath keeping community arise: A group of people that are able to keep the Sabbath holy by putting aside everything else on that day. There are several barriers to this coming to be. The first is that the people will have a hard time seeing it fully modeled in the life of their pastor. They know she desires it but struggles in keeping it. They know it is what is desired for them and they struggle with that too.

As has been discovered by many, there is no "one size fits all" pattern for keeping the Sabbath. In the world we live in today, with schedules so full and opportunities to be constantly busy surrounding us, it is up to the individual to discover how to keep Sabbath faithfully in their own way. There is an ideal: that Sabbath would be kept by all Christians during the same time frame. But there is also the reality of our scattered lives and schedules. The yearning remains and in some it will continue to grow louder and will seek to get met. Others will let it go and may at another time seek it out again.

As the pastor who struggles with the keeping of Sabbath, perhaps the best example I can offer the congregation is to openly continue the struggle, to share with them the success and failure while living among them. They are aware of this heart's desire and know that they are welcome to join in the conversation at any time. Perhaps in keeping the challenge ever before us and providing the information and tools needed so that anyone can learn about Sabbath if they choose too, it can from time to time be gently reintroduced as a spiritual discipline worth keeping. It is in us to want to rest and worship – this desire will not completely fade away from those who are pursuing an ongoing, transforming relationship with God.

Maybe one reason that Christians give the fourth commandment so little thought is that they don't see that failure to keep it is a significant breach of keeping covenant with God. Like running a few red lights, if one does not get caught, is there really any harm in doing it? Or in the case of keeping Sabbath – not doing it? Perhaps the church has failed to teach and preach the blessing and benefit of Sabbath keeping and has instead taken the approach of trying to shout down all the things that interfere without helping people want to choose to keep the day.

A renewed understanding of what Scripture says may help the church yearn to return to a day of fellowship, rest, and worship in which they can reclaim their sense of identity, community and realign with God's rhythm. God had a plan at the time of creation when the Sabbath rhythm was instilled into humanity. When God commanded God's people to keep the Sabbath at Sinai it was still part of the plan for humanity to experience the rest and worship of God in the rhythm of their week. God's desire for humanity to live within God's rhythm did not change with the New Covenant in Christ. As part of the creation mandate it stands for all time, fully being realized in God's eternal kingdom where every knee shall bow and acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord of the Sabbath and Lord of all.

This research set out to show that if Christians would commit themselves to the discipline of keeping the Sabbath holy, they would be realigned with God's design, and receive the blessing of living within God's rhythm of work and rest. As far as persons were willing to go on this journey, it seems that this is true. Those who were able to take time in their day to focus on God and those very few who faithfully attempted to keep a whole Sabbath day, felt more aligned with God and God's purpose in their life. These were both better accomplished in the midst of Christian community that was involved in the same pursuit.

Like any spiritual discipline, Sabbath keeping needs to be continually introduced to the people of God. Sabbath keeping needs to be thought of as important by those in Christian leadership and taught to those who will lead in the future and to those who follow now.

## APPENDIX A

### 'SECULAR SABBATH' - SPENDING A DAY IN THE UNVIRTUAL WORLD<sup>1</sup>

It's almost sunset on a Friday afternoon, and Hanni Rudansky has only a few hours to make a mushroom torte, chicken for dinner, tuna for tomorrow's lunch, steamed asparagus, a cake and various other dishes.

The mother of five sons and wife of a rabbi whirls from kitchen counter to counter. A Modern Orthodox Jew, Rudansky calls this the "storm before the calm," and necessary preparation for the Sabbath, or day of rest, which begins at sunset. There will be no electricity, no showering, no cooking, no driving. And in an increasingly wired, material world, a version of that spiritual tradition known as a "Secular Sabbath" is gaining appeal outside religious communities.

Jacob Grier, a 25-year-old blogger in Arlington, Va., has instituted "no laptop" Sundays for the past two years. He got tired of working at his local coffee shop and seeing everybody hidden behind their computer screens, ignoring each other, so he started leaving his laptop at home and bringing books instead. He started talking to people at the shop, instead of interacting with others on the Internet.

Now, his routine has expanded to incorporate some other friends and a whole day's worth of unwired activities. They meet first for coffee, they read, they go to a neighborhood cafe for a late lunch, come back, and close the session by sitting outside and smoking cigars.

Grier is an atheist, but he says what his Sundays offer is similar to what some people look for in religious services. "The large reason people go to church is to bond with their community, and in the same way, you can get that from going to the coffee shop every week," he says.

Indeed, the modern-day cafe might be the geek's personal sanctuary, and a great place to test the exercise of unplugging. Seattle-based coffee shop Victrola Coffee and Art shuts down its wireless service from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. "I love the opportunity it provides for chatter," says manager Tonya Wagner. They also have live piano music Saturday mornings, which surely helps draw people out of their virtual lives.

Getting away from the passivity that the Internet and other modern gadgets induce is a key ingredient in creating a kind of Secular Sabbath for oneself, says Ariel Meadow Stallings, a Seattle marketing manager at Microsoft. Stallings has attracted international attention for what she thinks is a pretty minor claim: She has launched a program called "52 Nights Unplugged."

"I don't think a geek in Seattle not checking her e-mail is news," she says. But in such a wired world, apparently, it is.

Her rules: Every Wednesday night, when she gets off her Wi-Fi-enabled bus, she officially removes herself from all screens. That means no television, no computer, no cell phone. She will take calls, but won't make them. She will listen to her iPod, but won't scroll through iTunes. She won't even go to a movie theater. So what does she do? "Oddly, a lot of house-cleaning," she says. Other favorites are dance classes, card-playing and old-fashioned letter-writing.

Stallings got the idea to unplug one weeknight when she began to realize that the Internet was taking her away from the moment. "I wasn't aware of time passing," she

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<sup>1</sup> Hillary Rhodes, "Secular Sabbath" - Spending a Day in the Unvirtual World," (*Northwest Arkansas*) *The Morning News*, 16 March, 2008, 10E.

said. "It was almost this unconscious, addictive behavior." When she started her resolution, in January, she said it felt like withdrawal. She was full of nervous energy. But now that she's stuck with it, it's having a positive effect on the other six days of her life. "It's encouraging me to be a little more mindful and aware of what I'm doing."

In an utterly 21st-century twist, you can read all about Stallings' off-line efforts on her blog: [electrolicious.com/category/unplugged](http://electrolicious.com/category/unplugged) or check out the online community she started where avid Web users can discuss the notion of unplugging once a week (<http://52nightsunplugged.ning.com/>). "I know it's kind of ironic," Stallings said. "It's like having an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in a bar."

For Rudansky, there is no such blurring of lines. She has to stop working when the sun goes down. "It is more than just the absence of work," she says. "It's the presence of the idea that there is this holiness in this day." And even in a secular day of rest, there may be something to be gained by subtraction.

## APPENDIX B

### SCRIPTURAL REFERENCES TO SABBATH

**Exodus 16:23-30** He said to them, "This is what the LORD commanded: 'Tomorrow is to be a day of rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.' " So they saved it until morning, as Moses commanded, and it did not stink or get maggots in it. "Eat it today," Moses said, "because today is a Sabbath to the LORD. You will not find any of it on the ground today. Six days you are to gather it, but on the seventh day, the Sabbath, there will not be any." Nevertheless, some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather it, but they found none. Then the LORD said to Moses, "How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions? Bear in mind that the LORD has given you the Sabbath; that is why on the sixth day he gives you bread for two days. Everyone is to stay where he is on the seventh day; no one is to go out." So the people rested on the seventh day.

**Exodus 20:8-11** "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

**Exodus 31:13** Say to the Israelites, 'You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy.'

**Exodus 31:14-15** Observe the Sabbath, because it is holy to you. Anyone who desecrates it must be put to death; whoever does any work on that day must be cut off from his people. For six days, work is to be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, holy to the LORD. Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day must be put to death.

**Leviticus 23:3** There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of rest, a day of sacred assembly. You are not to do any work; wherever you live, it is a Sabbath to the LORD.

**Deuteronomy 5:12-15** "Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."

**Jeremiah 17:19-27** This is what the LORD said to me: "Go and stand at the gate of the people, through which the kings of Judah go in and out; stand also at all the other gates of Jerusalem. Say to them, 'Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and all people of Judah and everyone living in Jerusalem who come through these gates. This is what

the LORD says: Be careful not to carry a load on the Sabbath day or bring it through the gates of Jerusalem. Do not bring a load out of your houses or do any work on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your forefathers. Yet they did not listen or pay attention; they were stiff-necked and would not listen or respond to discipline. But if you are careful to obey me, declares the LORD, and bring no load through the gates of this city on the Sabbath, but keep the Sabbath day holy by not doing any work on it, then kings who sit on David's throne will come through the gates of this city with their officials. They and their officials will come riding in chariots and on horses, accompanied by the men of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, and this city will be inhabited forever. People will come from the towns of Judah and the villages around Jerusalem, from the territory of Benjamin and the western foothills, from the hill country and the Negev, bringing burnt offerings and sacrifices, grain offerings, incense and thank offerings to the house of the LORD. But if you do not obey me to keep the Sabbath day holy by not carrying any load as you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses.' "

**Ezekiel 20:12** Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy.

**Ezekiel 20:13-26** " 'Yet the people of Israel rebelled against me in the desert. They did not follow my decrees but rejected my laws—although the man who obeys them will live by them—and they utterly desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and destroy them in the desert. But for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out. Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would not bring them into the land I had given them—a land flowing with milk and honey, most beautiful of all lands—because they rejected my laws and did not follow my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths. For their hearts were devoted to their idols. Yet I looked on them with pity and did not destroy them or put an end to them in the desert. I said to their children in the desert, "Do not follow the statutes of your fathers or keep their laws or defile yourselves with their idols. I am the LORD your God; follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Keep my Sabbaths holy, that they may be a sign between us. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God."

" 'But the children rebelled against me: They did not follow my decrees, they were not careful to keep my laws—although the man who obeys them will live by them—and they desecrated my Sabbaths. So I said I would pour out my wrath on them and spend my anger against them in the desert. But I withheld my hand, and for the sake of my name I did what would keep it from being profaned in the eyes of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out. Also with uplifted hand I swore to them in the desert that I would disperse them among the nations and scatter them through the countries, because they had not obeyed my laws but had rejected my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths, and their eyes lusted after their fathers' idols. I also gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by; I let them become defiled through their gifts—the sacrifice of every firstborn—that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the LORD.'

**Ezekiel 22:23-29** Again the word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, say to the land, 'You are a land that has had no rain or showers in the day of wrath.' There is a conspiracy of her princes within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour



people, take treasures and precious things and make many widows within her. Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them. Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain. Her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations. They say, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says'-when the LORD has not spoken. The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.

**Nehemiah 9:13-15** You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses. In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.

**Nehemiah 10:31** When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. Every seventh year we will forgo working the land and will cancel all debts.

**Matthew 12:1-8** At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath."

He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

**Matthew 12:9-14** Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." So he stretched it out and it was completely restored, just as sound as the other. But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

**Luke 13:10-17** On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the

people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath." The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

**Hebrews 4:1-13** Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet his works have been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "On the seventh day God rested from all his works." And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."

Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, God again set a certain day, calling it "Today." This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

## APPENDIX C

### THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY'S DIRECTORY FOR PUBLIC WORSHIP

The Lord's Day ought to be so remembered before hand, as that all worldly business of our ordinary callings may be so ordered, and so timely and seasonably laid aside, as they may not be impediments to the due sanctifying of the day when it comes.

The whole day is to be celebrated as holy to the Lord, both in public and private, as being the Christian Sabbath. To which end, it is requisite, that there be a holy cessation or resting all that day from all unnecessary labours; and an abstaining, not only from all sports and pastimes, but also from all worldly words and thoughts.

That the diet on that day be so ordered, as that neither servants be unnecessarily detained from the public worship of God, nor any other person hindered from the sanctifying of the that day.

That there be private preparations of every person and family, by prayer for themselves and for God's assistance of the minister, and for a blessing upon his ministry; and by such other holy exercises, as may further dispose them to a more comfortable communion with God in his public ordinances.

That all the people meet so timely for public worship, that the whole congregation may be present at the beginning, and with one heart solemnly join together in all parts of the worship, and not depart till after the blessing.

That what time is vacant, between or after the solemn meetings of the congregation in public, be spent in reading, meditation, repetition of sermons; especially by calling their families to an account of what they have heard, and catechizing of them, holy conferences, prayer for a blessing upon the public ordinances, singing of psalms, visiting the sick, relieving the poor and such like duties of piety, charity, and mercy, accounting the Sabbath a delight.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, 326-327, Quoted in Cox, *Literature*, 1:230.

## **APPENDIX D**

### **DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION AND JOURNAL RESPONSES**

In this appendix are recorded some of the journal responses that best defined what the group was experiencing throughout the project. The questions asked in the middle weeks of the project were answered with much more narrative and were more difficult to glean direct, helpful information from, so have not been included. Also here are the demographics of the participants of the groups next to their participant code.

#### **Demographics**

- SK1 Retired single woman who has returned to Rome after living in different cities and states prior to her moving back home. She has experienced different denominations and had more cross-cultural relationships than most of the other Romans.
- SK2 Retired woman who lives with her husband who does not attend church. She shares a lot of time with her grandchildren. She is a long time member of the church.
- SK3 Young mother of two young children whom she is diligent to bring to worship. She works outside the home and has a supportive but un-churched spouse. Has been part of the church family for the past several years.
- SK4 This woman is a married elementary school teacher. She grew up in the church and has consistently been involved in a variety of ministries in the church. She is married to SK5.
- SK5 Married, working man. Married to SK4 through which he came to be an active member of the congregation.
- SK6 Married, working woman whose husband is a regular worship attend-er. During the time we were meeting, her father's health was failing which played a key role in how she received and interpreted the opportunity to keep Sabbath.
- SK7 & SK8 This married, retired couple who has been faithfully attending our church for the past several years.
- SK9 Retired, married, extremely active woman in the church who frequently leaves town to help care for grandchildren who live elsewhere. Her husband is a regular worshipper at church.
- SK10 Married professional woman whose husband does not come to church and has

stated that he is not interested at this time.

- SK11 & SK12 A retired couple who have lived in the community all their lives. They are not members of the congregation but have been regularly attending for the past several years. They are very active in the community as well.
- SK13 A newer addition to the Presbyterian congregation, this married, professional woman brings her teenage children to worship but her husband prefers not to come.
- SK14 & SK15 In this married couple the wife works a full time job and the husband works swing shift. They have been part of the congregation for many years.
- SK16 Married, retired gentleman whose wife is a faithful and devout Catholic. They worship separately on most Sundays but during this study made an attempt to keep Sabbath together.
- SK17 Separated, retired man who is raising a teenage daughter. Very faithful church member in worship and in helping the other ministries of the church.
- SK18 Retired woman who works as a professional volunteer throughout the county. Her husband travels with his job but when he is home comes to church with her. She is not a native of the area and is newer to the congregation.
- SK19 This man is retired from his "real" job but works as a handyman around the community and helping with maintenance of the church. He grew up Catholic but married into the Rome church where he's become a very good Presbyterian. He's married to SK20.
- SK20 This woman works full time. She and her husband, SK19, are very faithful in the church she grew up in.
- SK21 This single, professional male is new to the church and very faithful in attendance when one of his two jobs doesn't require him to be elsewhere on a Sunday.

### **Week 1 (March 1, 2009): Introduction**

What are your thoughts and feelings as you begin this study of Sabbath?

- Hoping to bring the meaning of Sundays to a higher level for me and to pass it on to my family. (SK2)
- I eagerly approach this book, this class, this experience. When the day finally arrived for us to begin I thought about what I anticipated: a set of rules to follow for Sabbath keeping . . . I remembered growing up with "rules" – no dancing, no card playing. Rules that you either followed or NOT – black and white. So I'm thinking it will be pretty cool to have an author, scholar, and pastor set the rules and the group will serve as a support group encouraging all to follow the rules – yea! Shared responsibility; easier than going it on your own. But as I approached the classroom I knew Pastor would never take the

“easy” road, that individually and as a group we will work to develop deeper understanding and growth. The excitement I feel knowing I’ll have to work and think and take time, is knowing I’m being given an opportunity to grow in a deeper relationship with God. (SK9)

- A combination of fear and hopefulness. Fear: Is this something I can really get a handle on and grab a hold of? Hopeful: that I can because I feel that spiritually I need this stronger connection with God; that it will help me in dealing with every day stressors such as work, family, children. I know that one of my biggest weaknesses is that I don’t know when to slow down and just allow myself to meditate on something. Practicing Sabbath keeping would probably help me to remember to slow down, relax and take time to enjoy living. (SK3)
- I am excited about the journey. I feel like it is exactly what I need as I become overwhelmed with IEP’s, progress reports, PSSA’s, report cards, lesson plans, etc. I am more than ready and anxious to begin – exploring sabbath attitudes and practices! I am also a little apprehensive and unsure about the challenges ahead! (SK4)
- Fear (SK5)
- To learn about the Sabbath and what is expected of us. I’m hoping this study will teach me some things about myself. What I need to change and things I don’t? I’m hoping this will bring me closer to God, my spouse, my minister and friends and family. (SK15)
- I welcome this challenge and feel like leaping ahead into days, months, and years of a promise of rest like this: sustaining rest, rest that is like food. My only fear is that I’ll fail again?! to live up to the promise. So I ask God, even command My Lord to draw me to you because I will so likely fail allowed only to seek. (SK10)
- When first asked in Karen’s letter to participate, my response was – I don’t necessarily want to keep the Sabbath! My 85 year old neighbor is my idea of a Sabbath Keeper who finds Sunday to be the longest day in her week although she does end it each evening by phoning her grand-children. I think having a Spiritual discipline that I could keep would help me grow spiritually but I might not have picked this one on my own. Mowing my lawn, sewing, shopping are activities I may not want to relinquish. Control issues, and “I want what I want, when I want it” – seem childish, but are where I seem to be starting. (SK1)

What do you think of when you hear the word “sabbath”.

- Sunday (SK2)
- Sunday; rest; do nothing – no physical labor; read the Bible; church; Sunday School; Sunday dinner; time with family (SK9)

- I think mostly I think of dedicating time to worship God and being together with family. I also think of it as a time of reflection, a time to stop and think about the events of the day or week and put them into perspective. (SK3)
- I think of Sunday – keeping it a day of rest and worship (SK4)
- Honor the sabbath, keep it holy – Sunday – in the ten commandments. (SK5)
- It is a day of rest, time for church and Sunday School, family dinners. (SK11)
- I most often think of needing to slow down when you find yourself trying to be at two places back to back. You find yourself like going to an appointment and then having to go right on to work, etc. (SK15)
- The only thing I know about Sabbath is that it's a day of rest. (SK14)
- Though Sabbath represents a day (a Sun-day, Son Day) my desire is to have it at various times during the week or during the day. (SK10)
- Day of quiet, Saturday or Sunday? (7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists, etc.). Friday/Saturday prayers and candles for Jews. Solemnity. Amish families visit on alternate weeks from worship. Rest from work/restriction on activities/ more quietness when living alone is often too quiet. (SK1)

What are you looking for and anticipating as you commit yourselves to this project?

- To bring more meaning in all aspects of the sabbath, as I remember as a child. To slow down, reflect and open my heart to our Lord. (SK2)
- Making more room in my life to spend time with God. Oh, I get it – PRACTICE. The practice of spending time with God – so sabbath is every day – to develop a deep relationship with our Lord. A sabbath attitude; every day, spending time to rest, study, reflect, and respond to God. (SK9)
- A sense of inner peace. A stronger relationship with God. A better understanding of myself. A way to strengthen my children's relationship with God. To learn to relax – I really need to do this. (SK3)
- A calming, peaceful place to step back, get a breath of fresh air, focus on God's Word, and become closer to Him. I do desire this relationship but I am not certain how disciplined I will be – with all the events pressing in at work. (SK4)
- To help the pastor with her thesis – keep an open mind and maybe learn something. (SK5)

- Since we have been married my spouse has worked a 7-day swing shift for 20 years and therefore was only off on a weekend a month. Our children were involved in sports and had games on Sundays. Now my spouse is off weekends and the children are now leaving the nest. I'm looking forward to my spouse and I starting new adventures and starting new traditions. (SK15)
- I'm not sure what I want. I'm not sure what I'm looking for. I am curious though as to what I might find out and learn about myself and others. I don't seem to be fearful but just hope I'll know when I find I am looking for that's where I'll want to be. (SK14)
- I want the stuff of peace to be part of my soul so that it just leaks out when I stop, or even could calm people near me, too. For to share it is the key for me. (SK10)
- (Taken from dialogue between journalist and Jesus.) To be useful, more time and connectedness with family, more connectedness/relationship with Creator. Hesitation because it requires change, might be uncomfortable 'cause change often is. Might be just one more spiritual discipline I can't keep. I want desire and discipline to do this. (SK1)

#### **Week 5 (March 29, 2009): Sabbath as Receptivity**

What do you think about being the receiver of the gift of Sabbath from God?

- Many of us have a hard time receiving. Maybe we don't know how? When I have opened myself up to receiving it was a pleasure. So simple, but we make it so hard. (SK2)
- At first it made me feel selfish but the more I reflected on it, the more wonderful – receiving inspiration and strength is so important. (SK4)
- Feel indebted. (SK5)
- It is good to be told to receive. A receiver is at the center of attention and although I am not personally very comfortable in the center of attention, I still long to BE IT to be the Loved One, the Receiver. (SK10)
- While reading "Receiving as Grace" it really struck me that we are accepted by God and beloved by God before we do anything. IT begins with grace not achievement. (SK6)
- For many years I was not a graceful recipient . . . compliments were deflected; presents seen as a "problem" if I was unable to reciprocate; or just not accepted – I refused offer of housecleaning by my well-meaning boss when I had cancer treatments, etc. Letting others give because they want to without feeling guilty is relatively new and may help me be more appreciative of what God gives me as well. (SK1)



- The idea that we are receivers is interesting. I have never thought of it. At first it feels easy, but then, after thinking about it, I start to wonder what is expected in return? I know God wants us to receive his love, and his forgiveness, and other things. It's hard to imagine receiving without strings attached. What are they? (SK13)
- It is hard to be a receiver when you are accustomed to "doing" all the time. When someone offers to do something for me, I often attempt to decline, or feel I need to "repay" them. We should be able to accept another's actions/gifts without the feeling of obligation. (SK3)
- I would rather be a giver than a receiver, but we need to realize that sabbath is a gift from God. (SK11)

What is your understanding of "contemplation"?

- I think of this word as really thinking something through, weighing the pros and cons. I never thought of it as paying attention. (SK2)
- My idea of contemplation was to think about something, consider various options, and then, hopefully act or make a decision or resolve an issue. It is a practice, and attitude. (SK9)
- Thinking about something in an in-depth way, really trying to dissect and uncover all the nuance of an event or issue. (SK4)
- Figuring out a process (SK5)
- Paying attention to the details of my life what I need to want – paying attention to wonders, looking around myself. (SK7)
- "Contemplation" was always connected to monks and nuns who had days structured and devoted to studying and prayer – until I read Brother Lawrence's *Practicing the Presence of God*. It still usually feels out of reach but I do equate it with paying attention to God and including my Creator, Redeemer in mindfulness and inward conversation in all activities – or perhaps one or two each day for "five minutes". (SK1)
- I think of it as studying something to understand it. Like contemplating a problem; looking at it from different angles to come up with a solution. Or perhaps contemplating or studying a picture or object to appreciate it. It's a sort of total absorption. (SK13)
- The mulling over of a thought, idea or situation to help you come to a decision about what you want to do. (SK3)
- Paying attention to God's creation and your surroundings. Being mindful of events taking place also a time to plan. (SK11)

What helps or hinders you from worshiping in the service?

- What takes away from worship? Probably being raised attending church, I was taught to go in, sit down, be quiet. Most Sundays are very hard to prepare, because it is so noisy. I'm guilty too, but there have been many times, I don't or try very hard not to start a conversation. (The organist) could play "Happy Birthday" and most people wouldn't notice. (SK2)
- What takes away: Taking a passive attitude – it is so easy to make mental lists for the coming day/week. To day dream – thinking back on the previous week and its activities, its hurts, its problems, its joys. To focus on distractions around me – "Oh yeah, I have to remember to tell so and so this" etc., watching interactions between people. What helps: Take time to center, focus on begin fully in the presence of God. If I don't stop at the very beginning of the worship service sometimes it takes time to catch the attitude of attentiveness. If I write and make notes I'm more attentive – deeper thinking – connected. (SK9)
- When I get to church and when collection is being gathered they are two times that I like to have to myself and really concentrate on why I am in church. I like the silence at these moments and to sit, relax and just concentrate on the music etc. I feel those times at our church gets noisy. Everyone seems to be talking and it takes away from the moment for me. (SK15)

### **Week 6 (April 5, 2009): Sabbath as Release**

Reflections on being enslaved

- Our worship service is populated by those who are the same except for age. There is little difference in wealth, skin color, sexual preference, language – factors which often divide our society today. . . . We are just not in an urban situation with immigration issues, migrant workers, racial tensions, or faith divisions. We don't have to work at acceptance the way some other congregations might. Perhaps we also "self-select". (SK1)
- There are many times I feel enslaved, or just a work unit. A warm body to fill the chair. Working as a school nurse is a job of basically creating your own job description. A school setting is not the element of a nurse and mostly teachers don't exactly know what you're there for. Basically, they also step on my toes a lot. So, yes I feel like I'm the one that cleans up the messes others make. Unappreciated and unwanted. (SK13)
- I changed churches because of not feeling we are all equal on Sabbath. I came from a church where there was a definite "in" crowd. I've seen individuals ostracized and driven away for not being the "right sort of person". I know church is open for everyone regardless. By extension, Sabbath is an equalizer. Who cares what your last name is, where you live where you work, or how much money you make? God doesn't care. We are all his. (SK13)

- Many times I feel “enslaved”, going about the daily routine of going to work, keeping up the housework, cooking, cleaning, parenting. (SK3)
- I feel enslaved by always having to plan the next meal, making sure my husband, my sister and myself appointments are made and kept. Making sure everyone’s meds are filled and being taken correctly. These things make me feel enslaved. Then I feel guilty for feeling like this. (SK15)

#### Reflections on being friends

- . . . So it is with Jesus – available when we call, and showing up unexpectedly so we can enjoy his company or creation. . . . So with Jesus. Appointments are Sunday worship, and Bible Study. Dropping in to talk is a time before breakfast of The Daily Bread and church prayer list, or on a walk, or sitting and waiting for an appointment, etc. (SK1)
- It is humbling to have Jesus call me his friend. Look at all he did for us, and he wants to be my friend? I certainly do not deserve that. It’s very appealing. He is the kind of friend I can share everything with and he will never judge me unfairly. Even when I feel incredibly unworthy and unlovable, he stays my friend. (SK13)
- Being a friend of Jesus seems appropriate. A friend is someone you confide in, lean on during difficult times, and helps to lift your spirits when you are down. A friend is always there for you – Jesus is always there for us. (SK3)
- Appealing. Being a friend with God – thank him for things we see and hear during the day, read the Bible daily. (SK12)
- The song “What A Friend We Have In Jesus” comes to my mind often. No matter where we are there is always God. I find without my quiet time with God I become cranky and unhappy. (SK6)
- I have a hard time considering myself worthy to be God’s friend – yet I do yearn for that feeling of friendship with him. I do find myself turning to him and talking to him a lot more frequently – as a friend through this study. (SK4)
- I think to maintain this friendship I need to become more like a disciple and dedicate more of my life to following Him. Prayer, Bible study, church, living my life as a Christian example, praising and worshipping Him. (SK8)
- I feel that I’m not worthy to be called friend. (SK15)

#### **Week 7 (April 19, 2009): Sabbath as Refocusing**

##### Times when you are near to God?

- My morning walks, talking with my Aunt on subjects I have with no one else. Sitting on my back porch after my walks and sometimes throughout the day,

taking notice of what's around me and absorbing. Tragedies, mind and others always brings me closer to God. (SK2)

- There are times when I hope I am nearer to God. (Times of prayer, Bible study, Sabbath time, Sunday worship time, sometimes at a funeral or marriage ceremony.) Often when I see beauty in nature, a sunrise or sunset, autumn colors, a rainbow, or experience a miracle I know God's hand is involved. (SK8)
- Nearest to God out in nature – at the ocean – sitting in sand on a chair that is down in sand – water from ocean slapping up around my waist, sun on my face – breeze off the ocean, seagulls swooping, dolphins jumping gracefully across the ocean waves – boat in the distance – absorbing every part of the moment – knowing that God's love and peace surrounds me – feel it in the warmth of the sun. (SK4)
- I feel nearer to God when I am in church. Probably because you always put the two together.
- Morning quiet times. (SK6)
- In the hospital after surgery, a lady in the bed next to mine, came and held my hand and said a prayer. On a trip to Myrtle Beach, just sitting on the beach, view in God's creation. At the funeral of a loved one, you can feel God's presence. Going for walks and enjoying the fresh air, birds, flowers, all the trees on the hillside. (SK11)
- When I hang laundry on the clothesline. I usually only do this when the sun is out and it is warm. It feels so great to be in the sun, and I love the smell of laundry dried outside. I find myself singing and thanking God for creating the world. I also felt very close to God when my grandmother died. I was alone with her and had called everyone else in. I knew they wouldn't make it in time and I believe that is how she wanted it. I spent the last few moments with her stroking her head and telling her it was OK to go. I knew God was with us and was very thankful He ended her suffering. I had a student suffer a cardiac arrest at school. I performed CPR on her for 30 minutes before the ambulance arrived. I never got tired, never lost my focus, and was able to tell others around me what to do. I could feel God with me, keeping me strong. Afterwards I looked down and realized my necklace which happens to be a cross had come out from under my shirt during the whole event. The more I ponder on this, the more I truly realize He is always close to me I just have to listen. (SK13)
- Recalling past spiritual experiences that drew me close to God (SK1)

Do you find you need to refocus and how do you do that?

- Quiet time in the mornings, starts my day with God. Stopping and taking a breath – to refocus. Listening to the organ on Sunday mornings – before and during collection really helps me to feel inner calmness. (SK2)

- I think weekly if not daily we all need to focus our vision, priorities, and life. Attending church, Bible study, and since we started Sabbath time, I probably do it more than I used to. (SK8)
- I definitely need to take times to get things back into focus. I get caught up in the every day hustle and bustle of life. Work and Family – Always in a hurry. I need to learn to slow down and relax. I need to learn that I can't do everything myself. I need to learn to lift my worries to God. I've been trying to do this the past several weeks, but it is not easy for me. I pray and lift them to God, but somehow I'm not able to completely let them go. I know I need to and I know things are not always in my control. But this is a lot easier said than done for me. (SK15)
- Sometimes we get so busy with the everyday things, we forget the really important things. Stop, take a deep breath and refocus on the important things. Put God first. (SK11)
- I always need to refocus my vision and priorities. I'm not entirely sure how I accomplish this. . . . Deep breathing usually comes into play. (SK13)
- Needs to happen far more often than my daily mediation. (SK1)

Recall a personal experience of the holy, when you felt near to God.

- The closest I have ever felt with God was the time of my son's death. I truly felt him and heard his words of guidance. (SK2)
- I don't know if there is one moment in time or rather a collection of events that seem more holy than usual. Communion, times during worship services, certain hymns or gospel songs that trigger emotional feelings (give you goose bumps), Bible readings where the truth becomes more evident, and most of all when you see and know prayers have been answered. (SK8)
- Another time I experienced God was when my brother was in a bad car accident and broke his neck. I felt his presence there with all of us. He was comforting me. I also feel him now as we are going from specialist to specialist with my husband. I know we are not alone. (SK15)
- I'm not sure I can recall one specific time that I felt nearer to God than others. There are many times I can recall feeling this. I feel a shiver up my spine when I realize God is really at my side. Sometimes I feel Him during a song at church "Shine Jesus Shine" would be one of my favorites. I have definitely felt God at the death of my grandmother. I also discussed this earlier in my journal about feeling Him while performing CPR on a child. I try to be more in tune with His presence, but it usually takes me by surprise to realize that He really does know me. (SK13)

How do you prepare for worship?

- I usually listen to a spiritual tape on the way to church, and the organ prelude. (SK2)

- I didn't do much before than show up to Church and let the service prepare me. Since Sabbath time and especially at our sessions I am more conscious and focused on quiet preparation time. (SK8)
- Listen to the organ playing and thinking about the song, or any special music before church. (SK11)
- While lighting a candle and having time for mediation or "extra Bible reading" on Saturday night hasn't established itself – yet – perhaps it will be a special once a month occasion. For now, a core of our small group Bible study meets at 9:00 a.m. to share a Bible passage or thought from Daily Bread. We pray for the Pastor and congregation and ask that Karen deliver and the congregation receive the message God has for us that day. For me, praising God begins in the small group prayer time. It allows me to be in the Sanctuary with a smile on my face (hopefully) and able to greet friends/new folks and listen to them if needed – before continuing to praise God with them in worship. I am a little more connected than sliding in at 9:29 ½ a.m. (SK1)

#### **Follow-up Questions (Answers submitted September 20, 2009)**

In all the things discussed, what motivated you the most to keep Sabbath?

- I felt it was the right thing to do after all it is God's commandment! We were raised to not work on the Sabbath, but I never understood that the focus is not the absence of work, but the time to relax, rest, and be present to God. Reading through *Catch Your Breath* and the discussions with this group made me realize more and more how important Sabbath keeping is. It's not just something I should do, but it is essential to my relationship with God. (SK9)
- It's also "the group thing". If people come together for a stated purpose, I believe they are more likely to focus on that purpose and learn and grow toward the goal. So being part of a Sabbath keeping group motivated me to keeping the Sabbath. (SK9)
- The discussion on how important it is. (SK4)
- I think just every day life keeps you busy and the last thing I ever thought about was keeping the Sabbath. I was not brought up keeping it and never thought about it. But sitting there in our group on Sundays after church and discussing the Sabbath made me stop and think Big Time. What a wonderful thing to think about and what sense it makes. (SK15)
- Keeping the Sabbath seems respectful to God. This study made me realize that Sabbath is a gift from God and a much needed rest both physically and spiritually. It is restoration for the body and soul. (SK6)
- My desire to learn to slow down and to help teach my children that it is okay to have a "do nothing day" and reflect and remember what gifts God has given us. The weekly meetings were what kept me on track in the beginning. It made me accountable each week to be prepared for a discussion and it served as a weekly

reminder of what my goal was. Once these meetings stopped, I lost that accountability and that is pretty much where the journaling got lost. (SK3)

- It is a commandment from God and the one I most often break – along with covetousness, etc. (SK1)

What was most helpful for you to cease from in order to have a Sabbath mindset?”

- It was most helpful for me to stop working. At first I felt like I needed to apologize for the fact that I'm retired, therefore it is easier for me to be a Sabbath keeper. But I honestly think that a Sabbath mindset becomes or must be a priority. Now I believe that even if I were still working I would be a much better Sabbath Keeper! (SK9)
- I also had to cease just sliding into Sunday. Instead it is important/essential to prepare for the Sabbath. For example, thinking about how a Sabbath day will look? What will I need to do to be prepared? What will cause me to truly observe a Sabbath day – or a Sabbath moment? (SK3)
- From running errands, work, everything you try to catch up on when you work all week. (SK6)
- I didn't really cease from anything. Maybe deciding that I wasn't going to do any extensive house keeping/chores on Sunday. I have tried to keep my work to a minimum on Sunday, or doing things that I enjoy and find relaxing as working in my garden and baking. I have made an effort to do family things like visiting relatives, taking kids to a park or fishing, etc. (SK3)
- Ceasing or ignoring old mindsets of no work, travel, or enforced rest and Bible study may be what is suggested here. However the mindset that Sabbath can be anytime, any place seems to me to be too loose – that just describes personal prayer. The most telling sentence in the study was . . . “The Jews kept the Sabbath and the Sabbath kept the Jews”. (Set apart, not integrated into their surrounding, non-believing society.) I have come to believe that Sabbath is a group or community undertaking as well as an individual commitment. (SK1)

What made you ‘hang in there’ or ‘hang it up’?”

- The main thing that made me “hang in there” was how wonderful Sabbath Keeping made me feel. Because I'm a doer, what I learned through the course of this study was I don't have to feel guilty about doing “nothing”. Being a doer turned out to be a very positive characteristic, because instead of doing nothing I, of course, had to do something so I began to focus more on God. I feel more relaxed. Why? because through the weeks I think I'm becoming a friend to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because I STOPPED on the Sabbath, I'm learning to carry on conversations (not desperate pleas!) with God. I find God pops up more and more in my daily conversation with friends and family, which always intimidated me prior to our study. (SK9)
- I keep saying I'm going to try better for keeping the Sabbath, but find it hard to do when you have a spouse that works a swing shift and weekends. It's hard to



keep Sabbath when you don't have you and your souse doing it together on the same day. (SK15)

- It felt good. It also helped me work through my Dad's death. (SK6)
- Overall, I think I hung in there. The busyness of summer did interfere some. One thing I have found is that I get more off track if I miss more than one week of attending church. Going and participating in the weekly service brings me back and I reflect and remember the blessings I have and what God really wants from me. (SK3)
- Both. Wednesday has the accountability of personal time spent in Bible study with a group that night. The morning is spent in preparing "ugly quilt" sleeping bags for the homeless. Both activities provide a group to which I am accountable – but neither is Sabbath in my understanding. (SK1)

What would have helped you really commit to keeping Sabbath (i.e. more education, being convinced that it's necessary, continued meeting as a group, gathering for a starting Sabbath service)?

- For consistency it would and will help me to continue meeting as a group. It could be a group committed to Sabbath Keeping – with more education/reading/studying. It would help me to meet after church (as we did for this) with a group to do Bible study with a study guide. (SA)
- Continued meetings as a group would have made me more accountable for a journal. (SK4)
- I feel I was well informed with keeping the Sabbath and I'm not sure anything more would help. It was great having my husband be a part of this also. First of all he understood what I was trying to accomplish and I also learned a lot about him from doing this class. (SK15)
- I am convinced that it is necessary. Probably what would help me would be for my husband to share the same feeling. (SK6)
- Perhaps meeting every two weeks after the initial eight weeks. I think this may help keep people accountable and focused on the commitment and change they are trying to make. (SK3)
- I strongly doubt that I am willing to keep the Sabbath as I understand it. Sabbath keeping for the Amish, 7<sup>th</sup> Day Baptists or Adventists, Jews, and our Union Valley Mennonites has community wide expectations and social conformity – not so in the PCUSA or protestants generally. Expectations and accountability have been lost, and it is truly a community activity that is gone. (SK1)



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